

Why Bruce Rogers # 67.

Bruce Rogers

(trade edn)

Dedicated to DelWitt Miller.

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BY LEON H. VINCENT

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CENTURY

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CORNEILLE

By LEON H. VINCENT



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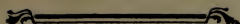
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To

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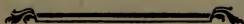


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THERE is a well-known print showing the salle du théâtre of the Palais Cardinal, Richelieu's magnificent abode, during the performance of a play. The two galleries are filled with sumptuously arrayed and decorously mannered ladies and gentlemen. The royal party occupy armchairs on the main floor commanding an unobstructed view of the stage, a luxury,



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by the way, which few besides royalty are privileged to enjoy. This distinguished group consists of Louis XIII, Anne of Austria, the Dauphin, and Gaston D'Orléans. Louis and his brother, oblivious for the moment of the spectacle, are holding an animated conversation; though it may be that this is only a device of the artist to enable him to show the faces of the eminent guests, since the picture is sketched from a point of view directly back of the royal party. Richelieu is nowhere visible. It is safe, however, to count upon his presence. One may believe that from some advantageous post the Cardinal's gaze is occasionally bent upon Gaston with a look in which are blended suspicion and amused contempt.

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This picture illustrates among other things how fashionable the drama had become. We are in the centre of the great social world, and that world is absorbed in the stage. Whatever the play may be, one thing is certain, it is the work of some poet approved of society. This theatre of the Palais Cardinal, with its pomp and magnificence, offers a striking contrast to the theatre of Hôtel de Bourgogne as the historians describe it.

A great barren hall floored with stone. A stage ill equipped and dimly lighted with candles. There are attendants whose business it is to keep the candles snuffed, and who do their work with little regard for what is taking place on the boards. That part of the audience which crowds the



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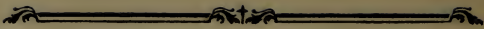
parterre does not even enjoy the humble luxury of seats, but must stand up during the entire performance. It is a motley crowd, 'merchants, artisans, scriveners, clerks, students, lackeys, bullies, and pickpockets.' They are brutal and noisy. Conspicuous among them are the king's mousquetaires, who exact the privilege of entering free, and who make 'un bruit d'enfer' in their pleasure or disappointment.

The performance begins with a prologue, always gross and often obscene. Then follows the tragedy or tragic-comedy. A farce is given at the close to relieve the strain, or perhaps there is a song less witty than suggestive. The entertainment was not one at which women could be present and at the same time maintain their self-re-

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spect. Nevertheless, polished society, which had so great an influence upon manners and conversation in the early Seventeenth Century, extended its humanizing virtues to this brutal theatre. If this influence is not at first easily perceived or always clearly to be traced, the fact must be attributed to that independence of temper which is a marked characteristic of the theatre and of theatrical life. The stage is a world to itself, and a world altogether impatient of external control.

We have seen how the Marquise de Rambouillet placed men of letters on a footing of social equality with the aristocratic world. Several years elapsed, however, before the poets of polite society were attracted to the stage as a field for the exercise of their



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powers. The theatre, with much that appertained thereto, was held in contempt until the time of Alexandre Hardy. This fecund playwright has been described as 'a Shakespeare without the genius.' Lanson calls him a carpenter rather than a writer of plays. His sense of literature was small, but he understood perfectly the art of dramatic construction. He wrote several hundred plays, faulty as literature, but admirable as stage pieces. His skill in the constructive part of his art attracted the attention and compelled the admiration of the poets of polished society. Racan, a pupil of Malherbe, a frequenter of the 'blue room,' used to see Hardy's plays at Hôtel de Bourgogne and ask himself whether these pieces which had so much dramatic

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virtue could not have a little more and become literature also. With this thought dominant in his mind he wrote the *Bergeries*. 'Society' was fully represented when the piece was given at Hôtel de Bourgogne.

Other poets followed Racan's example, and the social world was loyal to its poets. The polish, the elegance, the agreeable sophistication of the life of the salon, effected a complete transformation in the theatre, and the influence of a powerful minister completed the work in so far as it could be done without the help of a dramatic poet of transcendent genius.

The précieux poets and dramatists were able to give little to the national stage besides refinement and polish. Hardy is still regarded as the true

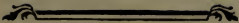


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precursor of Corneille. But the distance between Hardy and Corneille seems even greater than the distance between the predecessors of Shakespeare and Shakespeare. Corneille came with a genius of imperious self-assertive quality. It was a genius of that sort which makes bitter enemies, but which also wins enough applause to drown the hisses. Corneille created the French tragedy. His success was so overwhelming that he carried all before him. He was victor in spite of the Academy with its *Sentiments*, in spite of the Cardinal himself. The achievement was extraordinary. 'The man who derived in no sense from his predecessors, who learned nothing from Jodelle, nothing from Garnier, and very little from Hardy, was able to

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teach all who came after him.' He inspired Racine, he inspired Molière. All French dramatic history centres in Pierre Corneille. 'There is no greater name in the history of our literature.'



I

CORNEILLE was born in Rouen, in 1606. The critics admit that if one could not be born in Paris, or, what amounts to the same thing, come to Paris as soon as possible after being born, then Rouen was a very good starting-point for a poet. It was a publishing centre. It had literary and dramatic interests which were quite its own, and in no sense a pale reflection of what was done in the metropolis. 'After Paris it was the



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city where the theatre most flourished.' The famous Montchrestien, 'whose life and death were more tragic than his tragedies,' was a Norman, though not of Rouen. A society of comedians similar to the 'Enfants Sans-souci' of Paris had flourished there in the Sixteenth Century; they called themselves the 'Connards.' Their memory was green in Corneille's time. These traditions and associations had their effect upon the young poet. Rouen had also its Academy, the 'Puy des Palinods,' which encouraged poets and awarded prizes to successful practitioners in the art.

The Corneilles were a family of the 'robe.' The poet's grandfather, Pierre Corneille, was at first 'commis au greffe' of the Parliament of Rouen

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and then ‘conseiller référendaire’ in the ‘chancellerie’ of the same Parliament. The poet’s father, also a Pierre Corneille, was ‘maître particulier’ of waters and forests in the vicomté of Rouen. He was noted for his physical courage, and for the resolution and energy with which he suppressed the bands of marauders that pillaged the woods of the State.

Young Pierre studied at the College of the Jesuits in Rouen. He was solidly grounded in Latin, and received at least two prizes for skill in verse composition. The prizes were books: Herodian’s *Histories*, awarded in 1618, and Panciroli’s *Notitia Dignitatum*, awarded in 1620. These interesting relics of a great poet’s school-days are still in existence, and may be profitably



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examined by such as maintain that the men who take prizes in college never take them elsewhere.

At eighteen Corneille was, as we would say, admitted to the bar. He purchased two offices, one on the bench of waters and forests and the other in the administration of marine. For twenty years this was his work ; and he devoted himself thereto with scrupulous exactitude. He was studying dramatic composition in his leisure moments, to be sure, but he was first of all a man of affairs. This is a noteworthy characteristic of the great poets. With few exceptions they have been able and willing to do their share in bearing the homely and practical responsibilities of life. They have not sought immunity because



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they were gifted. As a rule, only the small poets plead poetry as an excuse for not working. This principle or rule does not suffer in the least because we know that Corneille was not happy in the conduct of practical affairs. Fontenelle says that Corneille had no taste for the law, and that he was not successful in it. All the more creditable to him are those twenty years of uncongenial legal work. In later years the poet's aversion to affairs increased; the mere word business was sufficient, says Fontenelle, to bring terror to his soul.

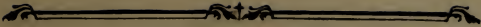
He made his dramatic beginning at the age of twenty-three, with a piece called *Mélite, ou les fausses lettres*, a comedy in five acts and in verse. The distinguished actor Mondory



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happened to be in Rouen. Mondory's experience was no doubt that of most influential actors and managers; aspiring dramatic poets brought him their plays to read and to approve. His experience may have been like that of a modern actor of whom I have heard. 'These young men bring me plays,' he said, 'and if I refuse to see them they leave the manuscript on the doorstep.'

Mélite easily passed the ordeal of a reading. It was produced at the Théâtre de Marais in Paris in 1633, and enjoyed a marked success. 'This piece was my beginning,' said Corneille in after years, 'and it was not according to the rules, because I did not then know that there were any. I had for guide only a little common-sense,



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together with the example of the late Hardy, whose vein was more copious than polished, and of some moderns who had commenced to produce, and who were no more regular than he.' Much of the success of the play must be attributed to the youth of its author, and to the fact that he was blessedly ignorant of the arbitrary laws of the art. As yet the fear of the dramatic pedagogues was not before his eyes.

Two or three remarkable facts about this play deserve comment. It was one of the first pieces to produce legitimately comic effects without the buffoonery of valets, servants, 'captains,' and doctors. Corneille prided himself upon this. He was an innovator and took pleasure in the improvements which he had made. The idea



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that Corneille was the Father of French Tragedy is so firmly rooted in our minds as to make us forgetful of his services to the other branches of dramatic art; and it is with something of an effort that we comprehend the statement of the critic who speaks of Corneille as the forerunner of Molière. 'This work, *Mélite*, made a revolution in the drama for which Molière has had the honor because his talent brought it out with great splendor.' Corneille may be said to have shown Molière the path which true comedy must take.

Another remarkable fact: the comedy of *Mélite* is a document which must be studied if one would know how the great social world of that day talked. Rœderer calls *Mélite* an

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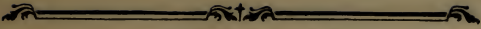
‘authentic monument of the habitual language of the best society.’ Where did Corneille so master the tongue as to be able to produce this piece at the age of twenty-three? Brunetière affirms that Corneille wrote all his life with a view to being acceptable to the précieuses.¹ The distinguished and learned critic does not mean that this was Corneille’s sole object in dramatic composition, or even his chief object, but that it was an object.

For a moment we have difficulty in readjusting our ideas to this new conception. We find ourselves entertaining a repugnance to the thought that the greater poetry can be the product of any inspiration short of the highest.

¹ Brunetière : *Manuel*, p. 132.

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If Brunetière had asked us to believe that such plays as *Mélite*, *la Galerie du Palais*, *la Suivante*, and *la Place Royale* were written for the précieuses, and that the mighty tragedies were for an audience greater than could be brought together in any one city or in any one decade, we should be prepared to admit the justice of the remark. Our critic is thorough-going, however; he does not qualify. Corneille, with all his universality and depth, was at the same time local, and, if you will, fashionable. ‘In *Horace*, *Cinna*, and *Rodogune*, where he mingles politics and gallantry, you are not to imagine that he imitates Justin, Seneca, or Livy; the manners are those of his own time, and the characters are taken from models who have posed for him.’



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We become reconciled to the thought after a little. It would be absurd to suppose that men who write for the stage do not always have the audience in mind. They who write without the constraint of an imaginary audience will produce plays which can be read and which cannot be heard. Why, then, should Corneille be excepted, he who had so perfect a command of the technique of the drama, and some of whose plays hold the stage to this day? Brunetière would have us believe that *Émilie* in *Cinna* and *Cléopâtre* in *Rodogune* are not cold studies from the antique, but a living and splendid reality, none other than the *Duchesse de Chevreuse*. We can the better understand the critic's position by keeping in mind that

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under the head of précieuses he includes the most eminent and cultivated women of that time.

Corneille would have been greatly and uncomfortably surprised could he have been told that modern criticism would come to this conclusion. Lanson denies that the poet has succeeded in catching the spirit of antiquity in a marked degree. The characters in the plays are labelled as of this nationality or that, but it comes to the same thing in the end; 'all are Frenchmen, contemporaries of the poet, and good subjects of Louis XIII.'¹ Lanson adds that what the drama of Corneille thereby loses in historic color it gains in intense actuality. The poet gives

¹ Lanson : *Corneille*, p. 168.



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us 'a faithful and striking picture of the France of Richelieu, of that aristocratic class which inaugurated the absolute monarchy and a social world.' According to this critic, the tragedies of Corneille are in large degree only the history of his own times.

The poet himself was quite convinced that he made his Romans talk, think, and act like Romans, and not at all like Frenchmen of the Seventeenth Century. Most dramatists have similar delusions about their work. No doubt one poet comes a little nearer to the classic ideal than another, but can any man feel certain that his stage Romans and stage Greeks bear more than a faint resemblance to the heroes of antiquity? Must they not of necessity be of the poet's own time,



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and own country? I am not sure that the absurdity of dressing the characters in costume contemporaneous with that of actors and spectators was not without its compensations. At all events, the mind of the spectator was not diverted from the play itself, and from the delivery of the lines, to the thought of how queer the antique costume was, and how ineffably absurd the average actor appears in a short tunic and a makeshift toga and 'looking as if he had forgotten his collar.' What a triumph of acting must that have been when Mrs. Yates played Cleopatra in a hoopskirt. We should not wish to return to so strange a conception of how a part should be dressed. The public of to-day would not tolerate Cleopatra in a tailor-made



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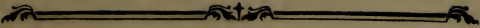
gown for the first act and an evening gown for the fifth act. Yet grotesque as the custom was, so long as it prevailed, and actors and actresses went on the stage in their every-day clothes, and no one thought it out of the way, it had its advantages.

After all, these great poetic creations do not make their appeal to the heart from generation to generation by means of archæology. If the play of *Julius Cæsar* depended for its vitality on the fact that Shakespeare had summed up the latest discoveries concerning Roman life and manners, that play would long since have gone the way of a hundred others and been forgotten. Where the dramatic poets of the first rank show their power is in the creation of types which all men can

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understand, types which are not of a single age or country, but universal. Shakespeare was characteristically English, but Shakespeare was none the less for all nations and for all time. Corneille may have written his tragedies with Hôtel de Rambouillet in mind, but above the local and the fashionable were the human and the universal elements. It is by virtue of these that he lives.

The question is still unanswered, and I do not recall that any attempt has been made to answer it: Where did Corneille master the language of that charming and sophisticated Parisian society so as to be able to reproduce it in his play? He had had no opportunity of visiting the great houses of Paris; and, if the boy was like the



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man, he was awkward, brusque, and at times sullen. These are not qualities to help one on in society. Nevertheless, we are asked to believe that *Mélite* represents the language and the fashions of polite society in 1630. Lemaitre is constrained to admit that if this be true, as is quite possible, the conversation of polite society must often have been 'bizarre.'

Instead of following up the success of *Mélite* with another piece in the same vein, Corneille produced in 1632 a tragi-comedy entitled *Clitandre, ou l'innocence délivrée*. It was a romantic drama, stuffed with incidents and involved to the point of confusion. It failed, and Corneille returned to his earlier manner and wrote *la Veuve, ou le traître trahi, la Galerie du Pa-*



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lais (1633), *la Suivante* (1634), and *la Place Royale* (1635).

The original edition of *la Veuve* contains a number of poetical tributes from various dramatic contemporaries. This was the custom, and it hardly needs the apology which Taschereau has seen fit to make for it in Corneille's behalf. There are not less than twenty-six of these complimentary poems. The first is from Scudéry, who bids the stars retire because the sun has risen, and who is florid in celebrating 'La beauté de la Veuve, et l'esprit de Corneille.'

Another is from Mairet, who addresses Corneille as the first of the beaux esprits to revive in his writings the genius of Plautus and of Terence. This was a stock allusion. A success-



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ful comic writer was always compared with those ancient dramatists.

There were tributes from Rotrou and Du Ryer. Also from Bois-Robert and Claveret. Bois-Robert is brief but most partial in his address to the 'Belle Veuve adorée.' Claveret writes both an epigram and a madrigal. These little verses may be read with profit when we come to study the attitude of Bois-Robert, Scudéry, Mairet, and Claveret towards Corneille some three years later. With the exception of Rotrou, the five men here named as contributing to the poetic eulogy became the bitterest of Corneille's enemies. Claveret in particular was brutal in his personal attacks.

In the *Galerie du Palais* Corneille for the first time dispensed with the

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traditional nurse, a part that was invariably played by a man made up to represent a ridiculous old woman. He also put upon the stage a scene with which every spectator was perfectly familiar, namely, the gallery of the Palais, with the shops of a bookseller, a haberdasher, and a dealer in linens and silks. Marty-Laveaux comments on the attractiveness of the device for the average theatre-goer. It is no less potent to-day, and is undoubtedly a legitimate effect. But it was the forerunner of a type of realism truly barbarous. We have seen the idea pushed to the last degree of absurdity at the present time, and the public in spasms of delight over a stage sawmill or a real load of hay. The success of the *Galerie du Palais* was not due to



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the inoffensive realism of the stage setting, but to the sparkling dialogue and the interesting situations. The play had a more favorable reception than anything else Corneille wrote up to the time of the *Cid*.

The young poet was now sufficiently celebrated to attract the notice of Richelieu. He was presented to the Cardinal. A number of interesting events followed upon this introduction. They can be the better understood if we have clearly in mind Richelieu's attitude toward the theatre and his immense influence as a patron of dramatic art.



II

THE Cardinal's interest in the theatre is well known. It was not alone his avocation, his hobby, but something more: it was his passion. Every moment that could be spared from politics was given to the stage. A taste for dramatic entertainment was generally diffused at this time. The public was unconsciously getting ready for Corneille, Molière, and Racine, and the Cardinal was as unconsciously helping the public in

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the work of preparation. Love of the theatre 'tyrannized' to such a degree that although there were two companies of players in Paris, one at Hôtel de Bourgogne and one at the Marais, Richelieu felt the need of yet a third, and created the troupe of the Palais-Cardinal.

The Palais-Cardinal, that magnificent residence which the great Minister built for himself when he found the Petit-Luxembourg 'unworthy' of his expanding puissance, was begun in 1629 and finished in 1636. The *salle de spectacle* was at the right as one entered the court of the Palais. The ambition of the Cardinal and the skill of the architect Le Mercier had united to make this theatre the 'most admirable in Europe.' Sauval says



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that unfortunately it was small, but its happy proportions, together with the skill of Jean le Maire, the decorator, produced the needed effect of amplitude.

Plays and ballets were given here. For example, in January, 1636, Richelieu entertained the Queen, Gaston, duc d'Orléans, Mademoiselle, the Prince and Princesse de Condé, the Comtesse de Soissons, the Duchesse de Lorraine, and the entire court, with a representation of *la Cléoriste* by Baro. After the play there was a ballet with an unusual novelty introduced: the dancers served a collation to the guests.

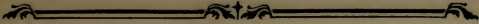
When the Duc de Parme was in Paris, during February of that same year, Richelieu received him at his



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palace and had played for his benefit the *Aspasie* by Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin. Music was rendered between the acts; the play was followed by a ballet, and the ballet by a supper. The entertainment lasted three hours.

Pleasures such as these required more than ordinary taste and skill. The audience was critical, and the host even more so. Richelieu was not a poet or even a good prose writer, though he is credited with what few people possessed in those days, a sense of orthography. But it was a time when all men wrote, and all women read, poetry. The poetry may not have been always of a high order, but technically it was admirable. There were more people who understood the theory and practice of the



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art than could be got together anywhere at the present day. And the Cardinal must be supposed to have had a measure of taste in that about which all cultivated people knew something. He was not too busy to write an occasional stanza or scene, and never too busy to dispute with his poets as to the way in which *their* verses ought to be written.

In 1641 *Mirame* was presented in the large theatre of the Palais-Cardinal. *Mirame* was Richelieu's favorite work. He lavished money upon the production. Mechanical effects of a sort to which the public was little used were attempted; the sun and the moon were shown in the act of rising, and ships passed to and fro on the distant sea. The Abbé de



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Marolles, who was present, did not find these novelties particularly entertaining. He held to the doctrine, as sound as it is old-fashioned, that the success of a play depends upon the recitation of the parts by good actors, the inventive ability of the poet, and beautiful verses. ‘All else is but useless embarrassment.’

No one was deceived as to the Cardinal’s relation to *Mirame*. The reputed author was Desmarests, but that display of intense solicitude on the Cardinal’s part was unquestionably paternal. He showed the liveliest satisfaction when certain passages were delivered. At times he was seen quieting the spectators immediately about him, lest they should fail to comprehend the beauty of the

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lines. When the applause was to his mind, he showed himself in the front of his box, smiling and evidently flattered. These are the airs of a dramatic author responding to the demands of an audience eager for a glimpse of him to whom they owe so much pleasure. A poet by profession, by gift, who finds himself writing plays with such a collaborator, is not in an altogether enviable position.

When Corneille was presented to the Cardinal, it was not that he might receive the congratulations and the 'God-speed' of the minister, but for a purpose which looked rather more to the glory of the statesman than to the glory of the poet. Richelieu invited Corneille to become one of a sort of dramatic commission or bureau.

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The function of this bureau was to write plays under the Cardinal's supervision. There were already four members, — Colletet, Bois - Robert, l'Estoile, and Rotrou ; Corneille made the fifth. It is believed that the Cardinal furnished the plan ; the poets did the actual work. They are known in literary history as the 'Five Authors.' The bureau was also a time-saving device. Each of the poets was assigned an act in the play, and given a month in which to complete it. Thus the entire play was composed in thirty days. One marvels that unity of effect and style could be expected of work done in this extraordinary fashion. Collaboration is always a mystery, but we have grown accustomed to the idea



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of *two* persons working together on a novel or a play; it requires an effort of mind to conceive how so intricate a literary form as a five-act drama, a form which requires the nicest possible relation between the parts, could have been wrought with such speed, and by so many persons each of marked individuality.

In 1634 the five authors composed the piece entitled the *Comédie des Tuileries*. Corneille was assigned the third act, so often the important and critical act of a drama. He saw in it possibilities which had escaped the Cardinal's eye. This is not surprising; for while Corneille was not as yet the 'grand' Corneille, he was a dramatic author by instinct as well as by considerable practice. His natu-

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ral medium of expression was the dramatic. He ventured to change the Cardinal's plan as he believed for the better, and received that famous reproof: '*Il faut avoir de l'esprit de suite.*' The Cardinal has been ridiculed for this criticism, and unjustly. 'When five poets undertake to sink their individualities to a given end, one of them must not step out of line.'

From this incident may be dated the beginning of the Cardinal's antagonism to Corneille. As yet it expressed itself negatively, by allowing the poet to withdraw from the commission, and by stopping, as was just, the pension which was paid him for work done in collaboration with his Eminence. Taschereau, a historian but little given to eulogizing Riche-

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lieu, quotes with approval Pellisson's remark that the Cardinal was 'very generous toward the five collaborators. In addition to the ordinary pension which each received, he lavished favors upon those who succeeded according to his desire : ' as when he gave Colletet sixty pistoles for six verses describing the 'carré d'eau,' and told the poet that the king was not rich enough to pay for the rest. Colletet wrote some witty lines in response, expressing a readiness to sell all his literary work on the same terms : —

*'Armand, qui pour six vers m'a donné six cents
livres
Que ne puis-je à ce pris te vendre tous mes
livres !'*

Corneille was not of those who



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obtained additional favors. He paid the penalty of not being docile under the strictures of the most influential dramatic critic of the Seventeenth Century. He went back to his home in Rouen, and wrote *Médée* and the *Illusion comique*. The former was not wholly a success, owing to the long declamations with which it was filled; nevertheless, it marked a step in the right direction, and announced the Corneille of the *Cid* and of *Polyeucte*.

The *Illusion comique*, which its author pronounced a ‘strange monster,’ delighted the public. It is a piece in the Spanish style, but has no prototype so far as is known. It is comédie héroïque, and may be accounted one of the best illustrations of Corneille’s versatility. The character of

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the Capitan Matamore was new to the public, or at least new in comedies of this elevated type. The bragadocio had been hitherto confined to farces and low comedy.

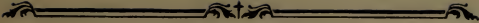
About this time Corneille's attention was turned to the study of the great national hero of Spain, out of which study was fashioned the play that was to make him famous.

There lived in Rouen an old gentleman who in earlier years had been secretary to Marie de Médicis. He was a Monsieur de Chalon. Corneille went to see him one day, and the old gentleman said : ' Monsieur, the type of drama which you have taken up will secure for you only a transient glory. But you will find subjects in the Spanish which, treated



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according to our taste and by powers such as yours, will produce great effects. Learn Spanish ; it is easy. I will help you until you are in a position to read by yourself and to translate some passages from Guillen de Castro.' He placed the book in Corneille's hands, the story runs. 'The world is much indebted to that Monsieur de Chalon,' says Jules Lemâtre. From his advice and the study and work consequent upon it, came that masterpiece of the classic French drama, the *Cid*. It was produced at the Théâtre de Marais towards the close of the year 1636. From this moment opened a new and brilliant chapter in the history of the stage, and Corneille, only thirty years of age, began to know as he had not



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known before, the glory and the unhappiness of success.

The *Cid* was mounted with unusual care. Mondory had realized its immense superiority to all other pieces, and had prepared himself for a triumph. The costumes, the stage-setting, all the equipments, were as perfect as they could be made. These things, which are now regarded as legitimate and even indispensable, were afterwards used to point arguments against Corneille. He was not only told that his play belonged in the category of poetical compositions ‘which are more indebted to those who speak the lines than to the poets who have written them,’ but he was also reproached for the generous assistance rendered by the stage carpenter.



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Only at long intervals does the public have the privilege of witnessing the first production of a masterpiece, and even then the public cannot know how extraordinary the privilege is. A great work of art can hardly be appreciated by contemporaries, and especially is this true if the work be dramatic. A play is the strangest of the art forms; to be successful, it must possess those superficial qualities which take the eye and have the price, and to be classic, it must have those qualities which lie beneath the surface and which only the next generation, and the next after that, can understand at their full value.

In order to appreciate the *Cid* as it was appreciated at the time of its first



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production, one ought to read a half-hundred plays by Corneille's immediate predecessors. After a course of those tragedies and tragi-comedies in which the French dramatic instinct was struggling toward perfection of form and clarity of expression, the reader would be in a measure prepared to understand how the superb energy of thought and matchless beauty of diction appealed to an audience comprehending them for the first time.

The *Cid* is not only a capital story dramatically told in spirited verse, but it is also a picture of heroic life and manners. It portrays the struggle between passion and filial duty. Chimène, the heroine of the play, loves and is loved by Don Rodrigue, after-



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wards known as the 'Cid.' He has not the splendid ancestry of which another suitor, Don Sanche, is able to boast, but he has youth and courage. His house is famed for its warriors, and his aged father was in his day a marvel of valor. It is the girl's wish and secret prayer that her father, the stately Comte de Gormas, may approve her choice, or rather that he may choose for her and as she would choose for herself. In that charming scene between Chimène and her gouvernante, the reader learns that the Comte de Gormas looks with satisfaction upon the prospect of an alliance between his daughter and Don Rodrigue.

The Comte is aspirant for the honor of governor to the Prince of

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Castile. To his chagrin, the office is conferred upon Don Diègue, father of Don Rodrigue. They talk together, and in a moment of irritation the Comte de Gormas strikes the old man. To avenge the insult, young Don Rodrigue challenges Don Gormas and kills him in a duel. In so doing he avenges the honor of his house, but he robs the state of its greatest warrior, for Comte de Gormas was held to be invincible. He also becomes the murderer of his betrothed's father, and Chimène demands his life in expiation of the crime.

The interest of this play centres in the struggle which goes on in Chimène's heart. The girl's love for Don Rodrigue as a lover contends with

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her hatred of him as the slayer of her father. For the moment hatred seems to triumph. Chimène is superb in her implacability. The measure of her love is the intensity of her ardor for the punishment of the murderer. Don Rodrigue is none the less her ideal of manhood, youth, and chivalric grace at the moment she implores the king for vengeance. And the question continually arises whether Chimène, who loathes Don Rodrigue as a murderer, would not have despised him as a coward had he failed in the piety due his own father.

Don Rodrigue justifies the hopes centred in him as a possible defender of his native land. In repelling the assault of a Moorish army which descends upon Seville, he per-

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forms deeds of valor more wonderful than those which had made the name of his father famous. He saves the state, strengthens the hands of his king, and brings back from the field of battle as captives two Moorish chieftains, who, struck by his prowess, salute him as their lord or seyd, that is, 'Cid.'

Chimène is persuaded to insist no longer upon revenge. She owes her own personal safety to the achievements of Don Rodrigue. To him the nation owes its existence, and thousands of men, women, and children their lives and their happiness. The Cid is the national hero, the saviour of his country. It is not possible now to deal with him as an impetuous youth, over-quick to draw the sword



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in defence of a father's honor; he has become a part of the thought of every patriotic Spaniard, his life is more precious than the lives of other men. But with Don Rodrigue glory counts for nothing while Chimène is his enemy. He will cheerfully die in preference to living and bearing the burden of her hate. It is difficult to imagine a plot less easy of solution. That the girl should marry her lover is repugnant to one's conception of what human nature is or can be. It is almost equally repugnant to us to think of Chimène as remaining obdurate. Corneille handles the narrative with infinite tact, but without any relaxation in his firm and broad treatment. The reconciliation of the lovers is effected through the influence



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of the king. This reconciliation is not so complete and instantaneous as to jar upon the spectator, neither is it so incomplete as to leave a sense of hopelessness and unrest.

Victorin Fabre, in his 'éloge' on Corneille, describes the effect produced by the *Cid* at its first presentation in terms so eloquent and glowing as almost to awaken distrust. With due allowance for the splendor of the theme and the enthusiasm of the orator, there is little question that the play-going world was immensely moved on this occasion. Paris was enthusiastic, and the court not less so. The tragedy had three performances at the Louvre, and what seems strange to us in the light of subsequent events, two performances at the pal-



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ace of the Cardinal. Taschereau says that Richelieu, 'not wishing to appear piqued by such a triumph, affected to complete the success' by opening his own theatre to the fortunate play. Not only were the usual honors in the shape of applause and congratulations showered upon the happy author, but at the queen's request a patent of nobility was conferred upon Corneille's father.

The *Cid* was the chief topic of conversation. The public wished to see nothing else. Richelieu tried to divert attention to a work of the 'five authors,' and gave a representation of the *Aveugle de Smyrne* at his palace before the king and the court. The time was not well chosen; the *Aveugle de Smyrne* only helped by con-



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trast to accentuate the transcendent splendors of the *Cid*. There is an often quoted letter which Mondory wrote to Balzac, describing the enthusiasm of the public over Corneille's tragedy. Mondory speaks with the honest delight of one who knows the satisfaction of playing to a crowded house. It seems that the social triumph was as great as the dramatic. People accustomed to the best seats in the theatre on ordinary occasions were thankful now to take the worst. Even the corners and out-of-the-way places, where the pages and retainers usually stood, were eagerly sought for by the quality.

Pellisson's testimony is conclusive. He says: 'It is difficult to imagine with how great approbation this piece



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was received by the court and the public. People could not weary of seeing it. One heard nothing else talked of in society. Every one knew some portion of it by heart. They taught it to children, and in some parts of France it passed into a proverb to say of a thing that it was as “beautiful as the *Cid*.”’

Nevertheless, a storm was gathering. Richelieu was not pleased. A less tyrannical personage than he might have been irritated to find that a hireling poet without *l'esprit de suite* could work so magnificently when released from his superintendence. There was a singular rumor in circulation at one time to the effect that Richelieu wished to buy the *Cid*, have it presented under his patronage, and

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allow it to pass for his own work. Verily, they tell strange tales of public men. This particular story has gained credence because the Cardinal once offered an enormous sum for a piece called the *Polyglotte*, by Le Jay. If Tallemant des Réaux is to be believed, Richelieu's anger toward the successful play reached such a pitch that Bois-Robert tried to appease and divert him by writing a parody on the *Cid*. This burlesque was played before his Eminence by lackeys and scullions, and it is to be hoped had the desired effect.

The thing is not improbable. Men of very great powers are often extremely childish and irritable in their diversions. They lose temper over a game of chess or an unlucky play in



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golf, and are philosophical in the face of real trials and disappointments. The theatre was Richelieu's diversion. The Cardinal played this game of dramatics with his whole heart and mind, and was bitter when he lost.

Corneille always believed that Richelieu, together with some person of high rank, encouraged Scudéry, Mairret, and others to make an attack upon the *Cid*. Professional jealousy was a motive sufficient to account for the origin of the attack, and to explain its peculiar virulence. But professional jealousy does not explain the sustained character, the unrelenting continuity of the attack; that must be accounted for by something of greater force, something less feverish than jealousy. The hostile party were sustained by the



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consciousness of recommending themselves to their master; they rejoiced in being able to gratify him who controlled both political and poetical rewards.

There was another cause for irritation. The *Cid* seemed to justify the practice of duelling. The Cardinal had tried to suppress by capital punishment the passion for settling questions of honor at the point of the sword. Men were barbarians in those days, and fought on the most trivial provocation. Voltaire says somewhere that, in a given score of years, of which ten were years of war and ten years of nominal peace, more French gentlemen died by the hands of Frenchmen than by the hands of their enemies. But the Cardinal had even greater



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cause for anger in seeing how, after he had employed his magnificent powers in abasing the House of Austria, a mere provincial poet could awaken a burst of enthusiasm in favor of Spanish ideals of chivalry and a Spanish national hero. Fontenelle declares that Richelieu was as alarmed as if he had seen the Spaniards at the gates of Paris.



III

CORNEILLE himself precipitated the ‘quarrel of the *Cid*.’ He was not only guilty of being successful, but in the eyes of his rivals the crime became heinous when he ventured to boast of success. Shortly after his triumph the poet printed the lines entitled *Excuse à Ariste*. In apologizing, half in jest and half in earnest, to a friend who had asked him to write a song, Corneille justifies his disinclination by the character of his

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genius. His mind is restive amid the restrictions imposed by petty verses, but it loves an eagle-like flight amid the clouds. He claims the right to speak frankly of himself as is the custom of the age. 'I know my worth,' he says; 'I have organized no league to compel admiration. I have few voices raised in my favor, but I have those without solicitation. My work goes to the theatre without other support; any one is free to praise it or to blame. I satisfy courtiers and people alike. In all places my verses are my only partisans. By their beauty alone is my pen valued, and all my renown I owe to myself, and only to myself.'¹

¹ Je sais ce que je vauz, et crois ce qu'on m'en dit.
Pour me faire admirer, je ne fais point de ligue:

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The apparent vanity of these stanzas is explained by that universal explanation, the custom of the times. People were naïve. They boasted of their virtues. Shakespeare said that neither monuments nor the tombs of princes

J'ai peu de voix pour moi, mais je les ai sans
brigue;

Et mon ambition, pour faire plus de bruit,
Ne les va point quêter de réduit en réduit.
Mon travail sans appui monte sur le théâtre:
Chacun en liberté l'y blâme ou l'idolâtre;
Là, sans que mes amis prêchent leurs sentiments,
J'arrache quelquefois trop d'applaudissemens;
Là, content du succès que le mérite donne,
Par d'illustres avis je n'éblouis personne.
Je satisfais ensemble et peuple et courtisans,
Et mes vers en tous lieux sont mes seuls partisans;
Par leur seule beauté ma plume est estimée,
Et pense toutefois n'avoir point de rival
A qui je passe tort en le traitant d'égal.

Excuse à Ariste.

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should outlive his powerful rhyme. What chances a poet takes in uttering a boast like that ! Corneille held much the same belief with respect to himself, and so far both Shakespeare and Corneille have been justified in their noble vanity. But such frankness is not for this century. If Cæsar had been a modern commander, he would not have been allowed to ‘drench his good qualities in his first person singular’ as he did in that famous despatch announcing his victory at Zela over Pharnaces. Men who achieve at the present time have but one recourse, which is to be praised in the newspapers and send marked copies to their friends.

The *Excuse à Ariste* greatly irritated Corneille’s fellow dramatists. It

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was easy to pervert the meaning of that line, 'Je ne dois qu'à moi seul toute ma renommée,' and to tell Corneille that he was a plagiarist who owed his renown entirely to Guillen de Castro. Mairet¹ wrote and published anonymously some stanzas in which he makes the 'true author of the *Cid*' demand back the verses of which Corneille had robbed him: 'To me thou owest all thy renown.' It was almost another case of 'the upstart crow beautified with our feathers.'

¹ Jean de Mairet (1604-1686), one of the most precocious dramatic poets of the Seventeenth Century. His *Chryséide et Arimand* was written before he had completed his eighteenth year. *Silvie*, *Silvanire*, *Sophonisbe*, and the *Galanteries du duc d'Ossone* are his more noteworthy compositions.

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The motive which led Scudéry and Mairet to attack Corneille was precisely that which prompted Greene to attack Shakespeare, to wit, professional jealousy, hatred of a rival in whom a moderate success would have been fitting, but who becomes detestable as soon as he becomes triumphant.

In resenting Corneille's claim to originality, and in reminding him of his debt to Guillen de Castro, his critics were not speaking from the point of view of those who were themselves always original, and who, having no need to borrow, abstained from the practice of which he had been guilty. On the contrary, the notable fact about the French drama from 1630 to 1660 was its lack of originality. Dramatic authors not only did not invent, but

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they did not even pretend to invent. They borrowed right and left, and boasted the extent of their obligations. Reynier says that they hardly seemed to suspect that there might be merit in originality. 'In their prefaces they plumed themselves not upon the exercise of their imaginative powers, but upon the happy choice of a model.' They drew from every source, the ancients, mediæval poets and dramatists, modern novelists, and above all from the Spanish playwrights. Corneille's contemporaries did not mean to accuse him of plagiarism as the term is commonly used, for all were plagiarists alike. The greater part of the comedies of Bois-Robert were taken from Spanish sources, and Reynier bluntly calls them 'translations.'



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Even if we grant that Corneille borrowed to the full extent charged by his most hostile critics, he would still be 'original' compared with his contemporaries. 'Originality' of invention in the drama and in poetry generally is a question that no longer troubles us. Who stops nowadays to question the originality of the *Idylls of the King*? Who would be so foolish as to ask whether the *Earthly Paradise* could be called an original work?

Corneille was right in saying that he owed his renown to himself alone. The Spanish drama lent him much, but it could not teach him how to write the most stately and beautiful verse that had been heard up to that time upon the French stage. Neither

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could it teach him the art of being ruggedly independent in situations where Scudéry took refuge in bombast and biting of the thumb, and where Bois-Robert was cringing and officious.

Guizot once made a happy and penetrating remark on this question of originality. He said that genius was as necessary for choosing well and imitating happily as for inventing outright. The whole field of Spanish dramatic literature was open to Corneille's contemporaries as well as to himself; but Corneille was the only one who had the wit to see the possibilities in the story of the *Cid* and in the plot of the *Menteur*.¹

¹ Guizot: *Corneille et son temps*. Paris, 1858, p. 201.

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Corneille was not the man to allow Mairet's attack to go unnoticed. He made a counter attack in a rondeau so bitter in tone that his most stalwart admirers do not entirely defend it. The publication of the rondeau had the effect of stirring up a new antagonist. There appeared an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Observations on the Cid*. The rhetorical flourish of trumpets with which the piece opened proclaimed its authorship. It was by Georges de Scudéry,¹ a prolific playwright, the brother of the famous Madeleine de Scudéry, and later the governor of the fortress of Nôtre-

¹ Georges de Scudéry (1601-1667). Among his best known plays are *Lygdamon et Lydias*, the *Trompeur puni*, the *Comédie des Comédiens*, and the *Amant liberal*.

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Dame-de-la-Garde. He was a man of great self-esteem. A modern critic dubs him 'Scudéry le capitaine Fracasse.' The fortress of which he had charge stood upon a high rock. The Marquise de Rambouillet said that she could not imagine de Scudéry in command of a fortress which was situated in a valley. She used to picture him in the act of living up to his conception of his importance, 'with head touching the clouds, his look fixed with contempt upon all beneath him.'

Scudéry declares that in penning his criticism he is not making a satire or a defamatory pamphlet, but a few 'simple observations.' He does not distinguish accurately between libel and criticism. He says of the *Cid* that 'the subject itself is absolutely

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valueless: that the play violates the principal rules of dramatic poetry: that there is lack of judgment in its management: that it contains many bad verses: that almost all the beauty it has is concealed: and that the esteem in which it is held is unjustly high.' He makes his points with infinite self-confidence. If the story of the *Cid* had any dramatic virtue, the honor of it, he says, would belong to its Spanish adapter, Guillen de Castro, and not to the French 'translator.' But as a subject for a play it is valueless because there is no intrigue, no Gordian knot to be unloosed. Nothing is held in suspense. The dullest spectator knows the end from the beginning. Moreover the play violates that law of the drama which insists that a story shall

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not run contrary to the probable course of human action in given circumstances. No doubt *Chinène* married *Don Rodrigue*, it is a fact of history; but it is most unlikely and altogether unnatural that a young woman of honor should wed her father's murderer. A fact may be useful to the historian which is of no value whatever to the poet.

After twenty-four pages of criticism in this sort, *Scudéry* takes up the versification. He accuses *Corneille* of using words that are vulgar and unfit for poetry, of writing French with German constructions, of extravagance of expression, of employing a word without any particular meaning simply to make a rhyme. If *Scudéry* had been a professor of literature rewriting the



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poems of Keats, he could not have been more exacting.

To this attack Corneille replied in a little pamphlet which has been described as a model of style; it is entitled, *Lettre apologétique du sieur Corneille, contenant sa réponse aux Observations faites par le sieur Scudéry sur le Cid*. After the publication of this letter, Scudéry appealed to the Academy to judge between them. The Cardinal insisted that the Academy pronounce upon the question, and through Bois-Robert secured Corneille's consent to such pronouncement. In the mean time the quarrel became general.

Corneille was indignant that men who professed to be his friends should have assailed him anonymously. He

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thought it ungenerous in Mairet to accuse him of plagiarism, and contemptible in Claveret, another pretended friend, to distribute Mairet's verses about Paris. In the *Lettre apologétique* Corneille gives vent to his indignation. He mentions Claveret by name, and couples the name with a plain and truthful phrase. Claveret took umbrage at the expression and attacked Corneille. Having little to offer in the way of argument, he descended to abuse. He says to Corneille: 'Bear in mind that in prose you are the most impertinent of those who know how to talk. The coldness and stupidity of your nature are such that your conversation excites pity among all who endure your visits. In good society and in the eyes of culti-

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vated people you pass for the most ridiculous of men.'

This was cruel, and the more cruel because it was partly true. Corneille was not a good converser. He astonished admirers by his incapability when for the first time they heard him talk. Ideas came to him readily in the literary work-shop, but not in the drawing-room. He would hesitate, become embarrassed, 'take one word for another,' almost break down. Condé said of Corneille that it was only possible to understand him at Hôtel de Bourgogne. The poet freely acknowledged it. 'I have a fertile pen and a sterile mouth,' he said in that little pen-portrait of himself which he addressed to Pellisson. He was by his own confession 'an excellent

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gallant at the theatre and a very bad one in society.' But people who knew him had learned not to judge him by his ability at small talk.

A torrent of pamphlets came from the press, some defending Corneille, others attacking him, others still taking a neutral attitude. The fecundity of the disputants was amazing. Colporteurs sold the pamphlets in the street as newsboys cry their extras at the present day. It is impossible now to identify the writers in every case, but the chief parties to the quarrel, Corneille on the one hand, Scudéry, Mairet, and Claveret on the other, signed a number of their papers. Rotrou,¹ a man of fine spirit and a poet

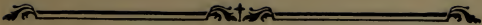
¹ Jean Rotrou (1609-1650). His best works

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of genius, remained loyal to Corneille, but his attitude was more conciliatory than partisan in this affair.

Mairet was roughly handled by Corneille's friends and became very angry. He had no humor. He wished to make his enemy a target for invective, but was unwilling to be used in like fashion. He wrote the *Epître familière du sieur Mairet au sieur Corneille sur la tragi-comédie du Cid*, 'in which,' says Taschereau, 'he compared the works of Corneille with his own and did not hesitate to give himself the preference ; this was both natural and easy.' Again, one cannot too

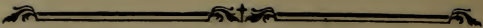
are *Saint-Genest*, *Don Bernard de Cabrère*, *Vencelas*, and *Cosroès*. He was without doubt the most gifted dramatic poet of his time after Corneille.



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much admire the naïveté of dramatic authors in 1637. They had unshaken confidence in their own powers, and the serenity of children in the way in which they tried to do themselves justice. They would not have been patient under the discipline of ‘Let another praise thee.’

The hostilities might have continued no one knows how long, had not the Cardinal interfered. Richelieu, ‘whose sole desire was to arrest the growing reputation of Corneille, but who wished the arrest to be brought about by other means than personal quarrels, interposed his authority.’ He had Bois-Robert write to Mairet that so long as these pamphlets displayed only innocent raillery and lively combats of wit, he was much



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diverted. But when he saw them become injurious and threatening, he determined to stop their course. He therefore commanded Mairet, if he desired the continuation of the Cardinal's good graces, to put his injuries underfoot. A like injunction was sent to Corneille. In brief, there was to be a truce.

In the letter to Mairet, Bois-Robert added a few words on his own account, or at least pretended that he did. 'Up to this point I have spoken by the mouth of His Eminence, but to tell you truly what I think of your procedure, I believe that you have sufficiently punished poor Monsieur Corneille for his vanities, and that his feeble defence does not demand arms so strong and penetrating as yours. One

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of these days you will see his *Cid* very ill treated by the *Sentiments of the Academy*. The printing of the piece is well under way, and if you come to Paris this month, I will send it to you.'

The relations between Richelieu and Bois-Robert were never better exemplified than in this letter. In the first paragraphs we have the Cardinal commanding peace, and in the latter paragraphs Bois-Robert, who in a case like this is always the Cardinal speaking unofficially, giving a covert thrust at the reputation of that 'poor Monsieur Corneille.' The method was absolutely perfect. 'I couldn't lie and so I got Harris to do it,' was the observation of a wit who understood human nature better than do most

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men. The Cardinal could not descend to personal abuse and threats, but he had only to lift his eyebrows and Bois-Robert did the ungracious task.

For the present the dispute was raised officially to a higher plane. The attack upon Corneille promised to be none the less determined because it was to be conducted by an army of critics, and there was every indication that it would be much more effective.

Scudéry, as we have already noted, had made an appeal to the Academy. 'He bravely transformed the duel into a law-suit,' says the Abbé Fabre. His document was a little pamphlet of eleven pages entitled, *Lettre de M. de Scudéry à l'Illustre Académie*. The author says: 'Since M. Corneille

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has taken off my mask and desires the public to know who I am, I profess myself too well accustomed to appearing among people of quality to wish still to hide myself. . . . In truth, since he desires that all the world shall know that I am called SCUDÉRY, I confess it. I shall never blush for that name which many worthy people have borne before me, seeing that I, no more than they, have done anything unworthy of a man of honor. But as it is inglorious to strike an enemy whom one has hurled to the ground, although the enemy utters maledictions, and since it is but just to allow the afflicted though culpable the right of complaint, I do not wish to reply to his outrages, nor like him to turn an academic dispute into a contest in Bil-

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lingsgate, or a lyceum into a public market.'

This lofty tone on the part of a man whose dignity was purely on the outside, and not dignity of thought or of character, has amused the commentators. Scudéry goes on to affirm that the success of the *Cid* is not due to the poet, but to the actors who presented the over-praised and by no means surpassingly excellent tragedy. How was it possible, then, that he should be envious of a piece which has so many faults, and the beauties of which are only such as have been given to it by the actors, Mondory, La Villiers, and their companions? 'However, your illustrious body shall judge between us.'

Scudéry's tone indicates that he felt

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sure of his ground. Was he so convinced of the justice of his cause as to believe it impossible for discerning men to think other than he himself thought? Or had the Cardinal in a moment of over-confidence promised Scudéry that the decision should be adverse? There is much to convince the student that Richelieu took for granted an almost slavish obsequiousness on the part of the Academy to his known or implied wish. In the light of what followed, we can hardly overestimate the extent of his disappointment. The English are not the only stiff-necked and independent race in Europe as their own historians would have us believe. No English legislative body bent on maintaining its rights and the rights of the people



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could have held out more tenaciously than did the Parliament of Paris when it was a question of registering the edict for the establishment of the Académie française. That same Academy in turn required extraordinary pressure to compel it to do its duty by the Cardinal its Protector. One can but liken this body to an energetic, vigorous, opinionated boy, who requires both coaxing and threats to make him do what his judgment and his prejudices rebel against. He yields at last, but he yields unwillingly and with mental reservations.

It was with more than common unwillingness that the Academy undertook the task of censuring Corneille's tragedy. The members tried all reasonable ways of evading the

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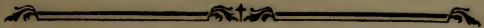
point at issue. They excused themselves on the ground of youth and unpreparedness. They appealed to their statutes, which forbade them to pass judgment upon the writings of men not of their body unless such judgment was particularly asked for ; the Cardinal forced Corneille to ask for the Academy's opinion. Not only was an opinion wrung from them, but extraordinary pains were taken by the Cardinal to insure an unfavorable opinion. In this he partially failed. These facts do not point to an excess of obsequiousness on the part of the Academy.

After all, why should the *Cid* be exempt from criticism more than another play ? That it was immeasurably better than any other play of the



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time is not equivalent to saying that it was absolutely beyond criticism. It is not thought sacrilege to speak of its faults at the present day. I take up Boissier's monograph on Madame de Sévigné and find him commenting on the *Cid* as if its 'inequalities of tone, its haughty familiarities, and its rudenesses of touch' were a matter of course, perfectly understood by all critics, and not offensive to Corneille's audience because the audience had not yet risen to the conception of a 'more scrupulous finish, a more sustained dignity and elegance.' If it is permitted to speak thus of Corneille in the Nineteenth Century, how much more so in the Seventeenth. Corneille and his genius were not as yet sacred, and the enduring virtues of



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great poetical works can only be seen at long range. To his contemporaries, no man can be a classic; at least there will be strong opposition when an attempt is made prematurely to elevate a poet to a station among immortal bards. This is one of the things we are bound to keep in mind, especially when we find ourselves inclined to grow angry at the hard treatment meted out to him by Corneille's fellows. He was simply one of themselves. Many a man has seen Shelley plain and liked him considerably less on that account.

On June 16, 1637, a commission was appointed to examine the *Cid* and Scudéry's *Observations*. There were three members, Bourzeys, Chapelain, and Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin.



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Another commission, consisting of Cérisy, Gombauld, and Baro, had for a special task the examination of the verse. They deliberated in ordinary and extraordinary sessions, and after summing up the results of their labors, turned over the materials to Chapelain, who drew up the final paper and presented it to the Cardinal. The latter was so confident of success that he suggested ‘throwing in a handful of flowers here and there.’ The memoir was then returned to the Academy for the finishing touches. This task fell to Serizay, Cérisy, Gombauld, and Sirmond. On completion the paper was sent to press and the earlier pages transmitted to the Cardinal. He read them, and immediately ordered the impression



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stopped. In suggesting a ‘few flowers,’ the Cardinal had not meant that everything was to be smothered in rose leaves. The severity of the criticisms had been too greatly mitigated. This was Cérisy’s doing. The generous abbé’s feeling toward the *Cid* was of hearty admiration; he wished it might have been his privilege to write such a work. Chapelain attempted to defend his fellow Academician, but presently desisted, knowing Richelieu’s intolerance of contradiction. For he saw that the Cardinal was beginning to grow heated over the question. Pellisson has a lively little picture of the scene. Richelieu took Chapelain by the tassels of his collar all the time he talked, ‘as one does without thinking when one wishes to

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be emphatic or to convince some one of a certain thing ;' in this way they used to 'button-hole' a man.

The committee perfectly understood what the Cardinal was after, and Sirmond undertook to reëdit the paper. He failed, in spite of the fact that 'his style was very good and entirely free from affectation.' We have a right to suspect that it was not a case where improvement in the style could satisfy. The Cardinal wanted his literary enemy condemned, and he found difficulty in bringing it about. In something like despair he returned to the original sketch made by Chapelain. This was printed with very few corrections or other changes, and is the official utterance of the Académie française on the great ques-

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tion which had agitated so many minds during so long a period. The exact title as given in Gasté's reprint is : *Les Sentimens de l'Académie françoise sur la tragi-comédie du CID*. It bears the date 1638, but was printed toward the close of 1637.

It has been criticised in turn from every point of view and in every shade of critical temper. These opinions vary from the bitterly hostile to the complacently approving. Partisans and devotees of Corneille are no better pleased with the pamphlet now than was Corneille himself when it first appeared.

Knowing as we do that Chapelain was the principal author of the *Sentiments*, it is not difficult to explain its narrowness of view. Chapelain wrote



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in verse, not because he had the divine gift of song, but because he had determined to become a poet. Verse was not his natural vehicle of expression. He composed poetry 'as a bird walks.' Never having been wafted away on 'song's bright pinions,' he was incapable of understanding the flights and raptures of a genuine poet. He was bound to be critical, wise, unimpassioned, and without sympathy. It was natural that he should look askance at a work so gloriously spontaneous as the *Cid*. Being what he was, how could he help running a blue pencil mark through this, and a red pencil mark through that?

Furthermore, he was the embodiment of law, the personification of the Academic spirit. There would be

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eminent fitness in regarding Chapelain as the inventor of the Three Unities, even if there were less historic ground than really exists for so regarding him. More than any other writer he gave the doctrine form and expression. What had been, hitherto, vague, intangible, and of little authority, became in his hands 'a dogma and an orthodoxy.' Other men had seized upon a point here and a point there; Chapelain grasped the doctrine in its entirety and stated it with classical precision. He converted Richelieu, who in turn converted others. The circles of influence widened until all the dramatic poets were more or less affected. The converts were not invariably true to the new profession of faith; but when



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they went astray, they were sure to apologize, to explain, or even to try desperately 'to juggle with the rules.' For the moment 'law' triumphed. It were asking too much of human nature to demand that Chapelain, the most conspicuous leader in the war of the Unities, judge the *Cid* by other standards than those which, in his heart of hearts, he believed to be correct. Such a man will create the impression of narrowness in the very effort to be just.

In one way the *Sentiments* was a novelty — it was gentleman-like in manner. Therefore it may be accounted an extraordinary production for the times. All the hostile pamphlets lacked urbanity, and not a few were positively brutal. One of the



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disputants affirmed that Corneille's proper place was in a hospital for idiots; another threatened to cane him with a view to curing him of poetic vanity. 'In spite of certain exaggerations . . . the general tone of the *Sentiments* is remarkable for extreme moderation, remarkable also for the elegance, distinction, and urbanity of the language.'

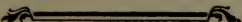
If Richelieu had small reason to be satisfied, Scudéry had even less. The 'capitan' was handled with courteous severity. Chapelain seems to take malicious satisfaction in explaining how often in his critique Scudéry misses the real point; the objection is justly made, but the reason assigned is bad or foolish.

Were it only for its urbanity, the



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Sentiments would take a high rank in critical literature. Chapelain may be pardoned his attitude towards a poem of which the most sublime and perennial beauties must after all have been hidden from his gaze. If he saw defects in the *Cid*, he also acknowledged its fine qualities. He granted that it was 'irregular,' but he reminded the readers that the defect was common in the dramatic works of the time, and was Corneille to be condemned because he had not wrought miracles?



IV

CORNEILLE'S discouragement was great, as may be imagined. That proud faith in the stability of his powerful rhyme was not sufficient to restore his mental equilibrium. He seems to have had the feeling of one who has been bruised, hounded, lacerated even, a state of mind most unfavorable to poetic composition. And there was something of timidity mixed with his profession of confidence.

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We get a vivid picture of all this from a letter written by Chapelain to Balzac early in 1639. Chapelain speaks of Corneille's return to Paris three days since, and says that the poet has been to see him, and has accused him, 'not without reason,' of being the principal author of the *Sentiments*. 'He has accomplished nothing more,' continues Chapelain, 'and Scudéry in quarreling with him has gained that much; he has made Corneille disgusted with work and has dried up his vein. I animated and encouraged him as much as I could to avenge himself both on Scudéry and his protector [the Academy] by making a new *Cid* to win the suffrages of the world; . . . but there was no way of persuading him, and he talked only of the rules,



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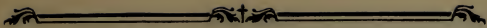
and of the things he was able to say in response to the Academicians were he not afraid of offending those in authority.'

This is the picture of a man wholly discouraged. But it is pleasant to have Chapelain's word for it that he tried to arouse Corneille's interest in his mission as a poet. The advice was sound, albeit it came from a critic who was the unwilling instrument of a good deal of the torture that had been inflicted upon Corneille. There was but one way in which the author of the *Cid* could really vindicate himself, and that was by writing another poem just as good as the *Cid*. Chapelain has been so universally abused during the centuries that I am confident he must have had conspicuous



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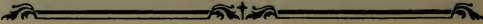
virtues. I should be glad to think that his advice had some weight with the poet, and that among the impulses which led to the composition of *Horace* was the word spoken that morning at Chapelain's house. Within a year from that time the new play was finished. It was presented either in January or February of 1640, and won universal approval. There was talk of a cabal against it, but nothing appeared in print. Corneille said proudly: '*Horace* was condemned by the Duumvirs but acquitted by the people.' *Horace* was the first of the French tragedies to conform absolutely to the rules. The poet had meditated to good purpose. The classic drama now came to perfect flower. The triumph was the greater because Cor-



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neille showed in this play that fetter his genius as the pedants would, it was still a transcendent genius. After *Horace*, nothing was left for the critics to say.

I am one of those who hold that he who was not born to the inheritance of a certain language will always find insuperable obstacles to a thorough comprehension of the high poetry of that language. This does not mean that no one but a Frenchman can understand Corneille; it means that there are subtle beauties in Corneille which only a Frenchman can understand. The Germans teach us many new things about Shakespeare, things undreamt of in our homely philosophy. We still plod along in the old belief that Shakespeare wrote his plays partly



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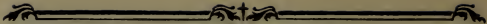
from the love of writing, partly because it was his business to write plays, partly because he had a family to maintain and a theatre to fill, and in very large part because he was a poet by instinct and was bound by the law of his being to express himself. But the German scholars, who would have us believe that Shakespeare designed to teach any one of a hundred remarkable doctrines in his drama, cannot with all their erudition help us in the least to that supreme enjoyment which is ours because English is our native tongue.

This play of *Horace* has its recondite charms which appeal only to the French mind, its delicacies of versification which only the French ear can appreciate; but at the same time there



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is no tragedy by the great master which makes so direct and strong an appeal to reader or hearer through qualities in the highest degree popular. The texture of the piece is firmly knit. The plot is striking and cumulative in interest. The language is energetic, every phrase, every word, pregnant with meaning. If any poet or any play can make a patriotism so exalted seem both possible and real, Corneille is the poet to do it, and *Horace* the play. We perhaps get a better idea of the logic of the dramatic form from *Horace* than from any other piece. The march of events is irresistible. The various scenes and acts are perfect in themselves and yet inalienably the parts of a great whole. It is a superb illustra-



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tion of how the most striking dramatic effects can be produced without the aid of mechanical appliances, without even that ridiculous pretense at a combat with swords to which long-suffering audiences are regularly subjected in warlike plays, when two men make a show of fighting on the stage, but take most palpable care not to hurt each other and especially not to be hurt. Some playwrights would have laid the greatest possible stress on the actual encounter between the Horatii and the Curatii. In Corneille's *Horace* this scene is described, not presented dramatically. When Camille is slain by her brother, the actual deed does not take place upon the stage.

The play presents a picture of that

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type of patriotism which has seldom existed among any people or in any time, but which was believed to exist in the heroic days of the Roman republic. The first scene makes clear to us the situation, and shows how divided were the interests both private and public. The rival cities, Rome and Albe, have joined issue in war. Their two armies are confronting each other. Sabine, the wife of Horace, is of Albe; her brothers, the three Curiaces, are in the hostile army. Camille, the sister of Horace, is betrothed to one of the Curiaces. These unhappy women are divided between love and patriotism. Loyalty to one's husband or one's lover means disloyalty to one's native land.

To avoid needless bloodshed, it is

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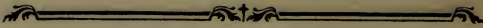
agreed that the dispute shall be settled by a combat between six chosen warriors, three for Rome, three for Albe. The defenders of Rome are Horace and his brothers; the defenders of the cause of the mother city are Curiace and his brothers. There is a notable scene in the second act which shows Curiace and Horace in marked contrast. The great Roman warrior has been told of his election to the high office of defender of his city. He questions the wisdom of the choice, but is ravished at the thought that he is held worthy to take into his keeping the destinies of the state. Flavian then enters, bringing the word to Curiace that he has been chosen to defend the cause of Albe. Curiace shudders at the thought of lifting his



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hand against the brother of his betrothed, against his sister's husband. To Horace, whose ecstasy of patriotism has a touch of the barbaric in it, there is a higher virtue and a greater joy in the sacrifice of those whom one holds most dear to the good of the country.

Corneille follows Livy closely in his narrative of the actual combat. Horace alone returns from the battlefield, accompanied by Procule bearing the swords of the three Curiaces. He calls on his sister to rejoice in that victory which, though it has brought death to her lover, has brought life to the state. Camille, more human than Horace, cannot rise to a patriotism so splendid, so self-abnegatory, and at the same time so brutal. She bursts



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into that passionate denunciation beginning —

Rome, l'unique objet de mon ressentiment !

and is slain by Horace as a traitress. Horace is pardoned, because the interests of the state are greater and more vital than the interests of an individual.

Was it courage or sheer audacity, ironical humor or self-interest, which prompted Corneille to dedicate this tragedy of *Horace* to Cardinal Richelieu? In the light of the events which had just taken place, one would scarcely think of his Eminence as the person to whom the honor rightfully belonged. Moreover, there are phrases in this dedicatory epistle which, if not servile, — and Corneille was too open-minded and honest to be servile in



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the grosser meaning of the word, — must be interpreted as irony of the most daring sort. Voltaire, that scorpion of kings and prelates, believed that Corneille meant to be ironical, and quotes in proof of it the sonnet which the poet wrote after the death of Louis XIII.

I cannot see an absolute lack of independence in the phrasing of this dedication. We must consider the times. Men rendered unto Cæsar the things that were Cæsar's, including florid ascriptions of praise. As the bows were more profound than now, so the language in which one addressed those great in station was highly colored, mannered, picturesque. Where society was as thoroughly organized as in the first half



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of the Seventeenth Century, men and women went through their parts like soldiers. They were drilled into the observance of forms and taught reverence for customs. One was able to see what Ruskin wanted to see in our day, kings with their crowns on their heads and bishops with their croziers in their hands. If one entered into this society, he must conform to its laws. Not every prince will have the wit or the patience of Charles II, who took off his own hat when George Fox refused to uncover. Corneille addressed Richelieu in the sophisticated and insincere phrases of a public dedication, which one might believe or not, but the *form* of which was predetermined, and as rigid as a court costume.



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So far as the fact is concerned, it remains for some daring critic to suggest that Richelieu asked for the dedication, that is to say, made known his willingness to accept it. We must not forget the imperious quality of Corneille's genius. He was the idol of the public. He was adored of Hôtel de Rambouillet. Thirty-three years after the production of *Horace*, Madame de Sévigné said, 'I am crazy over Corneille.' All the world was in that condition in 1640. The man was so immeasurably superior to his dramatic contemporaries that the fact was blindingly significant. He who denied was as one who denied the existence of the sun from whose rays he was that moment seeking shelter. There is nothing



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fantastic in the supposition that Corneille knew beforehand that his dedication would be acceptable to Richelieu.

The poet laments that the gift he brings is so little worthy of the Cardinal, and so ill proportioned to what is due. The choice of a subject cannot be condemned at any rate; and Corneille feels that he has guarantee of this in the words of Livy, who said of the story of Horatius, ‘There is hardly anything more noble in all the past.’ ‘The subject,’ says Corneille, ‘was susceptible of the highest graces could it have been treated by a more skilful hand; but at least it has received from mine all of which that hand was capable, and all that could reasonably be expected from a pro-



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vincial muse, who not being so happy as often to enjoy the attentions of Your Eminence, has not that lamp to her feet by which others are continually lighted.' The phrases did not sound grotesque to people who read them in 1640; they are grotesque to us who reflect how little Scudéry and l'Estoile were able to accomplish, though illuminated daily by those favorable glances which Corneille's provincial muse had to do without.

Cinna, ou la clémence d'Auguste, dates from this same year, 1640. The story is based on an episode in the life of Octavian. Émilie, daughter of Toranius, seeks to avenge the death of her father, who was proscribed during the Triumvirate. She is one of Corneille's most characteristic heroines,

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beautiful, steadfast, implacable. Her lover, Cinna, a grandson of Pompée, and therefore Octavian's enemy by political inheritance, is the chief of a conspiracy to overthrow the government and murder the Emperor. Both Émilie and Cinna are recipients of many favors and of high honors at the emperor's hands. Cinna has moments of doubt, in which he almost repents of his undertaking. Emilie, less infirm of purpose, holds her lover to his patriotic mission, and makes the emperor's life the price of her hand. When their plot is discovered and they are brought before Auguste, each tries to defend the other. Émilie takes the blame upon herself, protesting that she had tempted Cinna to join the conspiracy, as she had tempted many

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besides. She offers herself as a victim, though she cannot hope that her lover will be spared because of her self-accusation. When a crime has been committed against the state, there is no excuse. To die in Cinna's presence and rejoin her father, — that is her only hope and prayer.

Cinna, anxious to save her life, declares that he alone must bear the responsibility. He had laid this plan long before he loved her. She was at first inflexible, and only yielded when he made appeal to her wish to take vengeance for her father's death. Auguste, in whose mind there has been a struggle between the desire to forgive and the desire to punish, triumphs over any ungenerous motive, and in the greatness of his soul par-



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dons both conspirators. He unites them to each other in wedlock, and to himself by every bond which gratitude and admiration can suggest.

The tragedy of *Cinna* was dedicated to Montauron, who was so flattered thereby that he gave the author two hundred pistoles, a fabulous sum even in that period of reckless expenditure. Montauron was instantly turned into a proverb. A particularly florid dedication, and one likely on that account to elicit a handsome gift, was always spoken of as a dedication ‘à la Montauron.’ The expression was all the better for being true. The gentleman was noted for his liberality towards men of letters. It is a pity for their sake that his money did not last longer. Marty-Laveaux quotes

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from Gueret's *Parnasse réformé* two articles, which show how the financier's name was the subject of envious sport in the fraternity of writers. Among the reforms proposed were these : 'Article X, It is forbidden to lie in dedicatory epistles ;' and 'Article XII, All dedications à la Montauron are to be suppressed.'

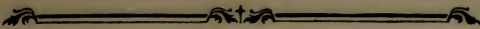
Polyeucte, martyr, was produced in 1643. This 'tragédie chrétienne' is Corneille's masterpiece. The story is briefly this : —

Pauline, daughter of Félix, the Roman governor of Armenia, has married Polyeucte, an Armenian lord. In Rome she had been beloved by Sévère, a brilliant young soldier, and had loved him in return. Her father's appointment to the governorship, and

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his natural opposition to accepting as son-in-law a man who had his fortune yet to make, puts an end to the hopes of Pauline and Sévère. The girl follows her father to his province, the soldier seeks renown through a heroic death.

Polyeucte becomes enamored of Pauline. She marries him because her father desires it. By this alliance with a powerful Armenian house, Félix hopes to strengthen his influence in the province. Pauline gives her husband from duty an affection which she could have given Sévère from inclination. Among the varied interests in this fine play, there is but one more absorbing than the growth of Pauline's love for her husband. As she realizes the greatness of his soul, his generosity,



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his self-forgetfulness, Pauline's measured respect and tempered obedience grow into pride and admiration, then into passion, culminating as the action of the play proceeds in the desire for martyrdom with Polyeucte.

Sévère was not killed in battle as had been believed. After heroic deeds and many adventures, he has risen to high rank, and has become the favorite of the Emperor Décie. He is now on his way to the capital of Armenia, ostensibly to take part in the great public sacrifices, really to claim Pauline. Félix is in distress at his approach. So, too, is Pauline, who has been warned in a dream that Sévère's coming means not alone reproaches, but disaster and death.

Polyeucte, though a convert to

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Christianity, has made no public confession of his belief. Spurred on by the exhortations of Nérarque, his friend, he rises to that height of zeal which was characteristic of the early martyrs, and denounces the old gods in the very temple at the hour of the public sacrifices. The two Christians are thrown into prison. Nérarque is put to death at once; Polyeucte, as a nobleman and the son-in-law of the governor, is given an opportunity to recant.

The most subtly planned devices cannot shake his faith, while the brutality of persecution and torture only serves to confirm it. He sees the punishment of Nérarque and is filled with envy. Confronted with his wife, who pleads with him to recant and abandon these ridiculous phantasms of

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the Christian belief, he finds himself put to the severest test. But he is unshaken. Pauline pleads her love; she reminds him of his rank, his influence, of his noble deeds and his rare qualities. The appeal to love and ambition are alike useless. Polyeucte loves Pauline, — less than his God, but better far than himself. He has ambition, but for a happiness ‘without measure and without end.’ He is lifted to so exalted a height of self-abandonment that he begs Sévère to accept at his hands the greatest of his treasures and the one of which he is the least worthy, — Pauline.

Though the death of Polyeucte will leave Sévère free to marry Pauline, his generous nature revolts against a persecution so odious. He urges Félix



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to relax the law against Christians. The governor fears a plot to betray him for weakness in administering the affairs of the province. He can prove his sincerity by putting his son-in-law to death. He thinks to meet craft with craft; and though the people clamor for Polyeucte's release, while Sévère warns, and Pauline begs with an eloquence born of a love that almost surpasses human love, Félix is unmoved. Polyeucte suffers martyrdom. His death opens Pauline's eyes to the truth. 'I see, I understand, I believe!' she cries. Baptized in the blood of her tortured and dying husband, she becomes a Christian, and calls upon her unnatural father to save his credit with the Emperor by subjecting herself to martyrdom. We can believe in the

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sincerity of Pauline's conversion ; it is not so easy to accept as logical from the dramatic point of view, or possible from the human, the sudden conversion of Félix. Threatened by Sévère, who as the Emperor's favorite is not likely to utter idle threats, Félix avows himself a Christian, and offers his life with that of Pauline as a sacrifice to the outraged Pagan deities. Sévère forgives, and with a largeness of soul characteristic of a noble Roman, promises that persecution of the Christians shall cease.

Brunetière's striking remark, quoted before, about the relation that Corneille sustained to the *précieuses* was based upon study too broad and profound to require the corroboration of a mere anecdote. But as one of the objects



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of this little series of studies is to show the variety and extent of the influences emanating from Hôtel de Rambouillet, the anecdote is in place here.

Before *Polyeucte* was put upon the stage, Corneille read the play at Hôtel de Rambouillet. 'It was received with the applause which politeness and the great reputation of the author required. But several days afterward Monsieur Voiture came to see Monsieur Corneille, in order to explain to him, with much delicate circumlocution, that *Polyeucte* had not succeeded to the extent its author imagined; that especially was it displeasing in its religiosity (Christianisme). Monsieur Corneille, alarmed, wished to withdraw the piece from the hands of the comedians who had undertaken it; but



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finally left it with them upon the judgment of one of their number, who did not, however, play in it because he was a very poor actor.' Fontenelle, who tells the story, adds: 'Was it, then, for this comedian to judge better than all Hôtel de Rambouillet?'

Everybody knows that many an actor whose powers are not equal to the performance of a part in a great tragedy may be an excellent judge of the dramatic possibilities of that same tragedy. One would like to know to what extent Voiture was empowered to speak for 'all Hôtel de Rambouillet.' Moreover, since Hôtel de Rambouillet had three years before defended Corneille against the Cardinal and his hosts, it had earned the right to an expression of opinion. And we must



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always remember that the poet was as yet only a successful dramatist, who had not reached his thirty-fifth year, and whose work could not mean to his contemporaries what it means to us, consecrated as it now is by the discriminating praise of two and a half centuries.

CORNEILLE'S genius reached its highest point of development in *Polyeucte*. In creating this passionate martyr, whose ardent spirit has reminded one critic of Saint Paul, John Huss, Calvin, and Prince Kropotkin rolled into one, the poet had given the measure of his power. Scholars date the period of his decline from the *Mort de Pompée*, produced in the winter of 1643-44. The word 'decline' is used relatively, however. *Pompée* is

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inferior to *Horace*, no doubt, but it is a tragedy which only Corneille could have written.

Two comedies, the *Menteur* and the *Suite du Menteur*, followed *Pompée*. The first of these is the piece to which Molière believed himself so greatly indebted. Molière told Boileau that without the *Menteur* as a model he might still have written comedies of intrigue, but he could hardly have written the *Misanthrope*. On the occasion of the *Menteur*, Balzac wrote Corneille: ‘You will be Aristophanes when it pleases you to be, as you have already been Sophocles.’

Between 1644 and 1647 Corneille produced *Rodogune*, *Théodore*, and *Héraclius*. The first of the three was received with ‘universal applause.’

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This is the play for which Corneille showed a strong liking, especially when people praised in his presence the merits of *Cinna* or the *Cid*. With characteristic open-mindedness, the poet confessed that this preference might be another illustration of that blind and unreasoning fondness which parents sometimes display for one child rather than another. *Théodore* shocked the audience by the repulsive character of one of its situations. This fact is often cited as a naïve illustration of Corneille's purity of heart. He was one of those rare poets who could touch pitch and not be defiled. He was amazed at the obstinacy of a public which insisted upon seeking and finding grossness where grossness was not intended. It may be cited among



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the paradoxes of criticism that the delicate-minded Voltaire was offended by the plot of *Théodore*. The world's debt to Voltaire is very great; but in all dramatic literature there is no scene comparable for mirthfulness with the spectacle of the author of the *Pucelle* reading the author of *Horace* a lesson in decency! In *Héraclius* Corneille grew more involved and complicated than ever. It is not easy to explain the success of this 'melodrama' with the public in the light of Corneille's own confession that it needed to be heard more than once to be comprehended, and that he had himself been told by persons well qualified to judge, that witnessing a representation of *Héraclius* fatigued the mind more than serious study. After this frank acknowledgment, we



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may reject as apocryphal that absurd anecdote which represents the poet as unable to follow the action of his own play when it was revived several years later.

It is amusing to find how ancient is the cry that the theatre-going public wants novelties, and how invariably that passion for the unusual is referred to some national trait or peculiarity. 'You know the humor of our French people,' says Corneille: 'they love novelty, and I venture *non tam meliora quam nova*, in the hope of being the better able to please them.' The reference is to the second of two novelties which Corneille put upon the stage in 1650, namely, *Andromède* and *Don Sanche d'Aragon*.

Andromède was a 'comedy with



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music.' It was spectacular, or as they used to say, 'comédie à machines.' The fashion was introduced from Italy. Torelli, a Venetian, who had the mechanical devices in hand, was so skilful that he was popularly called the 'Grand Sorcerer.' 'He invented the method by which it was possible to change the whole scene in the twinkling of an eye.' The music for this piece was composed by d'Assoucy. It was presented after long delay at the Théâtre de Petit-Bourbon. The success was 'prodigious,' and Corneille was more than rewarded for the delay of three years to which the piece had been subjected. We are allowed to think of this remarkable man as not alone the father of French tragedy, but as having contributed in no small



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degree to form the public taste for opera, and for a type of opera in which the poetry was not subordinated to the music and the stage setting. In his 'examen' of *Andromède* published ten years afterward, and also in the 'Argument' prefixed to the play, Corneille gives full credit to the inventor of the mechanical devices. These, he says, are so 'necessary' that to attempt to do without one of them would be to topple the whole edifice to the ground. He acknowledges that it is a piece for the eye rather than the ear, and he congratulates himself that he has so skilful a coadjutor as Torelli, who on this occasion has surpassed all his former achievements.

Don Sanche d'Aragon is a comédie héroïque. The play was not entirely

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pleasing to the authorities, for it seemed to touch too closely upon current events. There was no design in this. The case was not one where the dramatic author had made his allusions to fit contemporary history, but it comes near to being one of those singular instances where the event seemed to have taken its cue from the play. Don Sanche is represented as of humble birth, the son of a fisherman. He subdues monarchs, and plays havoc with the affairs of state. In the opinion of the ruling powers, the time was ill chosen for encouraging such ambitions, even in dramatic pictures. The war of the Fronde was disturbing France. In England a Cromwell had made himself military ruler, and the head of a king had fallen on the scaf-



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fold. These were bad precedents. What an uncomfortable thing, if it should turn out that in writing *Don Sanche* Corneille had been uttering prophecy! And so it comes that the Comte de Neufchâteau, in his book called the *Esprit du grand Corneille*, says: ‘Cromwell killed Don Sanche.’

Nicomède (1651), a comédie héroïque like *Don Sanche*, was the last of the poet’s great flights. He wrote nine or ten more pieces, but all inferior to this splendid play. He was fully conscious of the merit of the work, and might have admitted as wholly deserved the tribute of the admirer who declared that *Nicomède* was as beautiful as the *Cid*.

Pertharite (1652) failed completely, and in the opinion of its author, igno-

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miniously. The play had but two performances. So disappointed was the poet that he could not bear any allusion to the unhappy circumstance. He easily persuaded himself that he was too old — he lacked four years of being fifty — to please the public longer. In a preface to an early printed edition of the play, he spoke of his failure in terms which do not attempt to conceal his disappointment. ‘It is better,’ he says, ‘that I should take my farewell of the theatre at my own instance than wait to be dismissed. The facts are evident; after twenty years of work, I begin to realize that I am too old to be in fashion. This satisfaction I have, that both in respect of art and of morals I leave the French stage in a better condition

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than I found it. The great geniuses of my time have contributed much to the theatre, but I flatter myself that my efforts have not been to its injury. . . . Grant me the privilege of adding this unhappy poem to the one and twenty which have preceded it with so much success. This will be the last impertunity of similar nature which I shall make you !’

The touch of bitterness is unmistakable. Corneille pretty nearly kept his word, and had it not been for the expostulations of Fouquet, might never again have tempted public favor. As it was, his retirement lasted seven years. Fouquet, who was in the height of his glory at the beginning of the second half of the century, set himself to the task of bringing the

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author of the *Cid* back to the stage. The Surintendant was liberal toward men of letters. Corneille said of him that he was minister of belles-lettres as well as minister of finance. Fouquet proposed three subjects. Corneille elected to write a play on *Œdipus*. It was presented at Hôtel de Bourgogne in January, 1659. It was successful, perhaps for the reason assigned by a modern critic, who sees in *Œdipe* not a tragedy but a melodrama. The Court was attracted. The *Gazette* of February 15 announced that their Majesties, with a great number of persons of quality, went to Hôtel de Bourgogne 'to witness a performance of the *Œdipe* of Sieur de Corneille, the latest work of this celebrated author.'

It is exactly at this point that the



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biographers of Corneille celebrate the golden days of the poet's reputation. The militant period of his life was past. His fame had been increased rather than diminished by his seven years of retirement. He had had time to grow into the position of a classic. Many of his bitterest enemies were dead, others had been whipped into line by a public which does not in the long run judge amiss. Moreover, Corneille, being fifty-three years of age, was in some sort a veteran. Younger men rallied about him and did honor to his great gifts as they had not before. He was stimulated to work by these conditions.

In 1661 he produced the *Conquête de la Toison d'or*, which, like *Andromède*, was a tragedy 'à machines,' and



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with music. It was so successful that it was played the next winter. Then followed *Sertorius*, presented in February, 1662, 'by the comedians of the Marais.' This was the piece which so impressed Turenne, and led him to ask in astonishment : 'Where did Corneille learn the art of war ?' In 1663 *Sophonisbe* was produced, to the great annoyance of two petulant critics, de Visé and the Abbé d'Aubignac. Another irritating pamphlet war was declared. D'Aubignac stirred up a hornet's nest of small poets to attack Corneille. De Visé, ashamed of his companionship, withdrew, and began to defend the great dramatist.

Sophonisbe was followed by *Othon* in 1664, by *Agésilas* in 1666, and by *Attila* in 1667. The first of the three

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was received with little cordiality, and *Agésilas* was considered unworthy the author of *Œdipe* and *Sertorius*, as they in turn had been thought unworthy the author of the *Cid* and *Horace*. Boileau's epigram on *Agésilas* is often quoted: —

J'ai vu l'*Agésilas* :

Hélas!

Attila was not ill-treated at the hands of the public, and had twenty performances at the Palais-Royal by Molière's comedians. That *Attila* should have been produced by Molière rather than by the comedians of Hôtel de Bourgogne was due to Corneille's natural irritation at the preference shown for the works of his young rival, Racine.

Tite et Bérénice was produced by



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Molière's troupe in 1670. This drama and the brilliant *Bourgeois gentilhomme* were played alternately, each piece having about twenty performances. Corneille did not escape the charge of obscurity; what thoughtful poet does? In this play of *Tite et Bérénice* were lines which baffled his most devoted admirers. Boileau used to say 'that there were two sorts of *galimatias*, simple and double. Simple *galimatias* was where the author understood what he wanted to say, but other people understood nothing. Double *galimatias* was where neither the author nor the readers understood anything.' He illustrated the saying 'with certain lines from *Tite et Bérénice*.'

Baron, the famous actor who cre-

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ated the rôle of Domitian, was sadly troubled by these lines. The more he studied them, the less he comprehended them. He appealed to Molière, with whom he was living at that time, but Molière was not able to understand them either. He was able, however, to give sound advice. Said Molière: ‘Wait; Monsieur Corneille will be here to supper, and you shall ask him to explain them.’ When Corneille arrived, young Baron embraced him as was his custom, for he loved him; and then he begged the old poet to explain the four verses. Corneille, after having examined the lines for some time, said: ‘I do not understand them very well myself now, but do you always speak them;



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they who do not understand them will admire them.'

The anecdote is good enough to be apocryphal. It is to be found in *Récréations littéraires*, by Cizeron-Rival, and is copied into most of the biographies of Corneille.

Towards the close of 1670, Corneille wrote in collaboration with Molière and Quinault a spectacular piece for Carnival. It was Molière's idea to take the old story of Psyche for the subject. The music was composed by Lully, and the opera was presented at the Théâtre des Tuileries in January, 1671. They who are best qualified to judge say that there are few verses more graceful, more highly endowed with the indescribable charm of true lyric poetry, than these verses which



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Corneille contributed to the 'tragedie-ballet' of *Psyché*.

His last works were *Pulchérie* and *Suréna*. In the midst of their defects were passages which brought to mind the 'firm and imposing grandeur' of the greater plays. Corneille's mistakes were always the 'mistakes of a giant.' Even in this last fruit from an old tree were high qualities which belonged only to him.

VI

BUT little is known of Corneille's private life. He was neither eccentric in manner nor brilliant in conversation, and therefore people had little to say about him. For a man whose entire career had to do with the stage, he left but a slender harvest of anecdote. He lived until October, 1684. His brother Thomas lived until 1709, and his nephew Fontenelle did not die until 1757. But for all that he seems to come within our



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reach, and to be tangible in a sense in which Shakespeare is not, Corneille is shadowy and indefinite.

Yet there was nothing mysterious about him. He was a plain man, with simple tastes and homely interests. Historians tell us with an air of wonder that he was a dutiful son, a good husband, a good father, and a devoted member of the church. He was in fact warden of his parish for years, and was a singularly devout man. In every particular he was the opposite of the Bohemian playwright who is a stock figure in literary annals. What a contrast he offers to his old enemy Bois-Robert, whose history in the most recent and authoritative of works begins with this sentence: 'Bois-Robert entirely lacked the moral sense.'



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No, Corneille was not picturesque. He was strong, simple-hearted, he was a genius, but he was not picturesque. For this reason his contemporaries never got over their surprise as they compared the man and the work. They marvelled, tried to explain it to themselves, and then settled back in the belief that there was a psychological trick about it. Molière's story accounting for the operation of Corneille's mind may not be authentic, but it illustrates the case quite as well. Molière said that Corneille had a little goblin which hovered about him; and when the goblin saw his master cleaning his nails and getting ready to write, he would go up to him and whisper in his ear the things to say. Then Corneille would put them down.



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Afterward the goblin would go away a little distance and say to himself, 'Now let us see how he will do alone.' And then Corneille would write all those passages in his works which are so difficult to read. He would write until the goblin took pity on him and dictated once more. 'It was not the Corneille we know who wrote all the beautiful passages in his plays,' said Molière, 'it was the goblin.'

In his old age he became poor. Poets used to live in those days either by dedications; or 'little verses,' by which we may understand poems of occasion; or by 'domesticity,' which means that they took up residence at the house of some powerful lord, ate his bread, drank his wine, and sang



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his praises. It is not possible to imagine Corneille in such a situation; and since he had no great skill in 'little verses,' and could not write a dedication 'à la Montauron' every week, his case was a hard one. Once, when some admirer congratulated him on the success of his work, he answered: 'I am satiated with glory and famished for money.' There is a letter from a bourgeois of Rouen which describes Corneille sitting on a bench in a cobbler's shop while he has a shoe mended, and afterwards giving the shoemaker the three pieces of money remaining in his pocket. 'I have wept,' says the writer of the letter, 'to see so great a genius reduced to this excess of misery.'

Lemaître observes that, strictly

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speaking, the only point proven by this incident is that Corneille was a man of entirely simple manners. There is no rigid demonstration of poverty in the mere fact of the poet's going to the shop and waiting until the shoe was mended. The letter, however, was written by one who was sufficiently well acquainted with Corneille's affairs to see in this otherwise natural though unceremonious proceeding a fresh illustration of the narrowness of the poet's circumstances.

Corneille was not only simple of manner, but he was something more. They bring against him the unkindest charge that a Parisian knows how to make : 'Corneille remained always a provincial.' He never acquired urbanity of manner. He was brusque



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and even rude at times. According to Lemaître, this rudeness was not confined to his manner, it used to come out in his verse occasionally. The poet is a refreshing figure on this account. The reader becomes wearied of the supple courtiers and the smiling, insinuating abbés whom he meets so often in a study of this period. The Duc de Montausier and Pierre Corneille are as invigorating as a breath of cool air on a hot day.

Corneille married shortly after the triumph of *Cinna*. His wife was Marie de Lampérière, a daughter of Matthieu de Lampérière, ‘lieutenant particulier civil et criminel du Bailly de Gisors, au siège d’Andely.’ There is a tradition that Richelieu used his influence to help Corneille win the

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lady of his choice. The father was opposed to the match, but yielded readily at the Cardinal's suggestion. The story was first told by Fontenelle. Whoever wishes to read the refutation of this and other picturesque traditions of the poet's career will do well to consult Bouquet's historical and critical study, entitled *Points obscurs et nouveaux de la vie de Pierre Corneille*. The family with which the poet allied himself held a dignified position in the world and was fairly well to do. Six children were born of this marriage, of whom the eldest, Marie, is notable because by her second marriage she became the ancestress of Charlotte Corday.

Marie de Lampérière had a younger sister, Marguerite, who married

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Thomas Corneille. Nothing reflects greater credit on the 'grand' Corneille than his attitude towards his brother Thomas. He loved him tenderly, gave him a father's care and guidance after their father's death, helped him in his dramatic beginnings, and was at all times and in all circumstances his best and most unselfish friend. Is this why some of the biographers exclaim 'vie bourgeoise,' and declare that Corneille was a poet only in his works? What would they have? Apparently, in the minds of not a few critics, marital fidelity and brotherly devotion are not only vulgar, but quite incompatible with poetry.

Corneille's introduction to the brilliant society of Hôtel de Rambouillet took place about the time of his mar-



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riage. He was welcomed there as the most gifted and successful dramatic poet of the day. He read his plays before the Marquise and her guests, and contributed three poems to the *Guirlande de Julie*. To the Marquise de Rambouillet, who cherished sincerity and all the other qualities which we call 'sterling,' the poet's presence must have been grateful. To ordinary men and women of fashion he was an enigma. He had few social gifts, and perhaps despised 'the graces.' His reading of his own works was like most authors' readings, more curious than agreeable. According to Vigneul-Marville, the poet never spoke his own language very correctly, though this may have been from pure negligence. They talked of his



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‘Norman patois.’ His nephew, Fontenelle, says that the poet read his verses with force but without grace. According to the report of persons less favorably prejudiced, Corneille was barely intelligible when he read aloud.

Though not a handsome man, Corneille had ‘a very agreeable countenance.’ His eyes were full of fire, his nose large, his mouth finely shaped. He was of medium height, neither fat nor thin, though inclining towards a full habit, and quite negligent of dress. He might have been taken for a ‘merchant of Rouen’ rather than a portrayer of the life and thought of heroes.

He became a candidate for the Academy first in 1644, and again in 1646. The company rejected him



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the first time in favor of de Salomon, and the second time in favor of Du Ryer. Too often these facts are told in a way to reflect upon the Academy. It is but fair to say that the policy of this body was to choose, of two eligible candidates, the one who made his home in Paris. There were exceptions to this rule, Balzac being the most conspicuous.

After Maynard's death, Corneille again offered himself. He told the members that he had now arranged his affairs at Rouen so as to be able to pass a part of each year at the capital. At the time of his reception into the company (January 22, 1647), he pronounced a discourse which his ardent admirer, Taschereau, has declared to be one of the worst of compositions,

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hardly redeeming its faults by its brevity.

In criticising the historians for omitting to speak of that rule against non-resident membership of the Academy as applied to the case of Corneille, we are not absolving that body from the charge of narrowness. It was not altogether liberal in its attitude toward the great dramatic poet. But its narrowness can be explained, if not defended. The Academy was after all a club. It did not call itself one; but the traditions of the Golden Age remained, and good fellowship was a phrase which still had a meaning. It was impossible that men should not be affected by these considerations in the choice of new members. Whatever social virtues Corneille had were

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not pronounced. Though an eminent poet, he was not a man whose society was sought by other men because of his 'clubable' qualities.

He was probably a negligent Academician. One cannot easily imagine him as regular in attendance and eager over the minutiae of Academic business. He assisted at the public functions, but took no prominent part in the routine work. Marty-Laveaux says that his colleagues were proud to have him among them, and were not disposed to be exacting in their demands. No finer tribute to Corneille's modesty of demeanor could be paid than was paid by Racine, who said that one might look in vain for any evidence that Corneille wished to take advantage of his great renown. 'He



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came as a docile pupil, seeking to be instructed in our meetings, and leaving his laurels at the door of the Academy.'

Corneille was a very proud man, but his pride often took an unusual form. In his age men were boastful of their ancestry, and apparently there were no ancestors who were not noble. Occasionally we find an exception like Voiture, who was handicapped by the fact that everybody knew about his father, the wholesale wine-merchant of Amiens; yet Voiture had a sturdiness of nature quite incompatible with that thin vanity which is flattered by the consciousness of being technically 'noble.' The majority of men were only content with the particle *de*. They yearned for it, and

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would do anything to obtain it. They were willing to toil, flatter, cringe, lie. So common was the particle, and so doubtful of origin in many cases, that it ought to have been debased. But it was not. No extravagance of use could dim its splendor.

Corneille had no foolish affectation of this sort. To the end of his days he remained Pierre Corneille. So far as we know, he never used, or encouraged others to use, any title in connection with his name. In a legal document he is spoken of as *Sieur de Damville*. This fact disturbed *Taschereau*, who tried to explain it on the ground of failing mental powers. The document in question related to the sale of Corneille's house in Rouen, and was drawn up the year before the



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poet's death. In the second edition of his *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de P. Corneille*, Taschereau announced with triumphant satisfaction that he was wrong in supposing that the poet had assumed the title himself. It was applied to him by his relative, Le Bouyer de Fontenelle, who had charge of the sale.

Still less was Corneille guilty of that vulgar and disgusting form of vanity which boasts the humbleness of its origin and exalts its present condition at the expense of poor but worthy parents. He was simple, natural, unaffected. Had he continued financially prosperous, he might have been more genial. Men are wonderfully placid and easy-going under the discipline of wealth.



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His mental vigor declined perceptibly as he advanced in years. He showed the effect of a long life of intense application. He became more straitened in circumstances. Lanson says, recounting the sources of his income, that Corneille was at no time in misery. One could the more readily believe this, were it not that the world always contains people able at the same instant to boast their houses and lands and to bewail their lack of money. Lemaître likens Corneille, in all that concerns money, to the elder Dumas and to Honoré de Balzac. When such men have ready money, they are incapable of realizing the state of mind consequent upon being moneyless. Without necessarily be-



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ing spendthrifts, they spend as if the source were inexhaustible.

There was a tradition that during the poet's last illness, Boileau, knowing Corneille to be in great distress and perhaps at the point of death, went to the king and generously offered to sacrifice his own pension, if by so doing Corneille might be reëstablished in his. 'The king immediately sent two hundred louis.'

This tradition enjoyed an uninterrupted existence up to the year 1888. It was then reinterpreted, by Bouquet, in the interest of that strict historical verity which we all admire, and are reluctant to receive because less piquant than tradition. The king did indeed send Corneille 'money to die with,' but not at the instance of



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Boileau. Corneille died some time during the night of September 30 and October 1, 1684.

He was buried in the church of Saint-Roch, 'without mausoleum or epitaph' to indicate to the stranger the place of his interment. One hundred and thirty-seven years elapsed before any memorial was raised to his honor. In 1821 the Duc d'Orléans, afterward Louis-Philippe, placed a commemorative tablet of marble on one of the pillars in the church. On this tablet was sculptured a medallion of the poet together with an inscription which says: 'Pierre Corneille, né à Rouen le 6 Juin 1606, mort à Paris, rue d'Argenteuil, le 1^{er} Octobre 1684, est inhumé dans cette église.'

His brother Thomas, younger than



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he by nineteen years, succeeded to his arm-chair in the Academy. His widow survived him ten years. The fortunes of his children and grandchildren were various, and neither more nor less happy than the average of human fortunes. In 1728 the family of Corneille was supposed to be extinct in the line of direct descent from the poet. Marie Corneille, who derived from a collateral branch, received substantial assistance from Voltaire, and from all whom he could interest in her welfare, as the only living representative of the great name. Voltaire had the discomfort of being roundly abused for not exerting himself afresh in behalf of another Corneille, who announced himself at Ferney one day as a direct descendant of

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the author of the *Cid*. It was Claude-Etienne, son of Pierre-Alexis Corneille, who in childhood had been abandoned by his father and whom the world had lost track of. He was now thirty-five years of age, had been a soldier and an adventurer, and was for the moment a beggar. Voltaire took a very philosophical view of his case. He apparently decided that as Claude-Etienne was a man in the prime of life, and by no means ignorant of the ways of the world, he was quite able to shift for himself.

Marie, eldest child of the great Corneille, was twice married. Her second husband was Jacques-Adrien de Farcy. Of their two children, François de Farcy married Adrien de Corday. Of this marriage was born

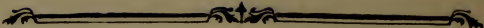
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Jacques-Adrien de Corday, who espoused Mademoiselle de Belleau de La Motte, and begat sons and daughters to the number of eight. The most notable of the sons was Jacques-François, a lieutenant in the regiment of La Fère, whose daughter, Marie-Anne Charlotte de Corday, killed Marat, and a few days later died by the guillotine. This girl of twenty-five played a rôle so impassioned and heroic that one may look in vain for its counterpart in the tragedies of her great ancestor.



VII

CORNEILLE'S services to dramatic literature were so great and so varied that it is not easy to comprehend them. One may glibly repeat Faguet's statement that 'Corneille carried to a degree of perfection hitherto unknown all the dramatic forms, tragedy, comedy, tragi-comedy, melodrama, and spectacular piece,' but the full significance of this statement is only to be grasped by much reading and not a little reflection.



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Consider, for example, how great a service that poet renders the literature of his native land who writes plays which are not only perfectly fitted to the needs of dramatic representation, but which may also be read with the highest degree of pleasure. Corneille's best plays are absolutely dramatic and unqualifiedly literary. They have that rare distinction by virtue of which a multitude of beauties not to be perceived in the reading are brought into prominence when the play is played ; and by virtue of which, on the other hand, beauties of thought and diction too subtle for the atmosphere of the play-house are disclosed in the quiet of the study. The rank and file of dramatic authors are blind to the significance of this lesson

taught by the masters of their craft. Knowing, as they must, that there is small chance of life for a play which is not strongly tinged with the literary quality, they still court oblivion for the sake of an immediate and a brief popularity. Some of these superficial pieces have a longer career than others. The genius of a brilliant actor gives them a semblance of life; but it is only a semblance, and when the actor dies, the play dies too.

It can hardly be accounted among the least of Corneille's services to dramatic literature that he purified the stage. Where licentiousness had reigned for years, cleanliness came to take its place. In bringing about this reform, the poet had no motive which was not praiseworthy. There is a

kind of virtue which is commercial; it would be vicious, were it not that morality pays a higher rate of interest. Corneille was haughtily above the influence of these low and careless motives. His was one of those large natures which in its splendid health of mind and body despises filth of any kind.

In the third place he demonstrated that the creative artist may be splendidly self-conscious. He was a critic of adroit and penetrating powers, no less in command of the 'theoric' than of the 'art and practic part' of dramatic writing. He rendered a service to the little understood art of dramatic criticism by his three *Discours*, and by those prefaces called *Examens* which are to be found in most editions

of his plays dating from the year 1660. The edition of 1660 was in three volumes. Each volume contained two essays, one on the general theory of dramatic composition, and one on the several plays contained in that particular volume. The essays on the general theory of the drama bear the following titles: *Discours de l'utilité et des parties du Poëme dramatique*, *Discours de la Tragédie*, and *Discours des trois Unités d'action de jour et de lieu*. In the *Examens* Corneille justifies, explains, or condemns his manner of handling the materials of the individual plays. Critics have been known to lament the pains which the great poet took in accounting to himself and his public in the small matters of dramatic casuistry. Would that

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Shakespeare had cared enough for his own work to do the same! But there is a school of criticism which prefers that a poet should never explain, and which despises the bard who is intelligible.

Corneille, the master of tragedy, also takes high rank among the lyric poets of France. He made a poetic version of the *Imitation of Jesus Christ*. He translated from the Latin the *Office de la Vierge*, the *Hymnes du bréviaire romain*, the *Sept Psaumes pénitentiels*, and many other pieces besides. We need not lay too much stress on Lemaître's malicious suggestion that the seasons of exalted piety during which these devotional poems were composed always followed hard upon personal disaster. It is plea-

santer to read this critic's tribute to the fecundity of Corneille's poetic vein, and to be reminded that this remarkable man 'left from twenty to twenty-five thousand verses, translated either from liturgical Latin or the Latin of the *Imitation*;' in other words, that Corneille wrote 'twice as many lyric verses as Lamartine and three or four times as many as Alfred de Vigny.' Verily, there were giants in the Seventeenth Century!

He is a unique and altogether attractive figure. I cannot understand that attitude which denies to Corneille's history the quality of interestingness. One critic says that he had no 'life,' another that he had a career which was all of a piece, dull, without event. The world has curious

ideas of what constitutes 'life.' If a man haunts the wine-shops, is a roysterer and something of a rake, if he writes his poetry between fits of intoxication and dies in debt, his biographer will talk gravely about the profundity of his experience. But if he is respectable, goes to church, has a family and supports his family, dresses for dinner, and has some consideration for society and the state, the advocates of a mild bohemianism will talk about the narrowness and stupidity of his career, and will tell you how little such a poet knows of the great movements and forces of our time. There is a deal of rubbish in print exalting the irregular literary lives at the expense of the regular. We shall expect one of these days to

hear a lament that Shakespeare did not lead a broader existence. Why, this man Shakespeare was actually respectable. He made money and kept it. He owned city property and an estate in the country. He attended to his bills, and saw to it that money due him was paid; if it was not paid, he sued for it. To Shakespeare there was no disgrace in being a gentleman. He was broad-minded, sweet-tempered, affable, distinguished for his common sense, 'while all do speak of his uprightness of dealing.' He makes quite as good a showing as if he had been stabbed in a tavern brawl like his friend Marlowe, and left but a splendid promise and an unhappy memory.

Corneille's career was not dull. His cup of life was filled to the brim with event. He knew the commonplace and the exceptional phases of existence. If in the outward aspects of his history there was much that might be called work-a-day, it was the better for him. In those stretches of time when there was little outward disturbance, the poetic life was strong, full, and rich. How is it possible to apply the word 'commonplace' to the man in whose brain were forming the heroic figures of the *Cid* or of *Horace*?

He knew the city and the province, the drawing-room and the justice's court, the splendors of Hôtel de Rambouillet and the squabbles and petty jealousies of that mimic world

the theatre. He knew for a moment Richelieu, and perhaps understood him rather better than Bois-Robert, whose only will was to do the Cardinal's will. He knew the extremes of popularity and neglect. He had stood on the highest pinnacle of public favor, had seen the court and the city frenzied with admiration over his achievements, and on the other hand he had tasted the bitterness of defeat and neglect. He had lived through that trying period in the life of a man of genius when he understands that the battle is not to the experienced and the wise, but to the young and the buoyant. He cannot be said to have accepted his misfortunes philosophically; I am not trying to show that Corneille was a 'philosopher,'



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but that he was a man who lived, suffered, passed through the myriad experiences of his fellow man, and was the richer and better for the very simplicity of those experiences.

There was discovered in the city of Rouen, many years ago, an old book of parish accounts. Some thirty pages of this book are in Corneille's own hand. The poet's house in Rue de la Pie belonged to the parish of Saint-Sauveur. The church has long since completely disappeared, but the enormous folios which contained the parish accounts were preserved, and in 1840 a scholar, Deville, discovered 'to his surprise and joy' that Corneille had kept the books for a year and made the entries of receipts and expenditure, with his own hand. Cor-

neille was 'treasurer in charge' of the parish from Easter, 1651, to the corresponding date 1652. There was satisfaction over this discovery for the reason that examples of the poet's handwriting are 'excessively rare.' Deville reminded that part of the public which shared his interest that these entries must have been made about the time when Corneille was writing his 'admirable tragedy of *Nicomède*.' The coincidence is sufficiently striking in itself; we are not required to follow the enthusiastic discoverer to the point of believing that Corneille may have written *Nicomède* and kept the parish accounts 'with the same pen.'

It is a pleasure to know these homely details of a great poet's life.



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Genius is never more attractive than when it is busied and patiently busied with the commoner affairs of life. Great men are so imposing and so inscrutable, they make such a demand upon one's powers of admiration, that it is a relief to get some testimony as to their human and familiar qualities. Rœderer used to wish that it might have been his privilege to see Madame de Sévigné sitting with her friends, embroidering or sewing. A glimpse of the great epistolary artist as she appeared in hours of relaxation, when she employed her time as less gifted women employed theirs, would be illuminating, the distinguished critic thought. Who would not rejoice in the discovery of some fragment of those accounts which Geof-

frey Chaucer used to keep when he collected revenues on skins and tanned hides for the port of London? The finding of some hitherto unknown poem would hardly bring us so near to the author of the *Canterbury Tales* as memorabilia of this homely character.

The only relation to genius which the majority of us sustain consists in the ability to appreciate it more or less imperfectly. Perhaps for this reason alone we should rejoice in every detail, no matter how commonplace, which has the effect of narrowing in some little degree that gulf which divides the man of genius from the vast multitude of human beings.

The unconscious element in Corneille's work has been absurdly exag-



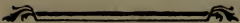
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gerated. The poet lived among the mountain heights, and when he came down into the valley, he seemed odd and childish to the dwellers in the valley. They said foolish things about him, as, for example, that he was able to estimate the value of a play only by the sum he received for it. This is to push the 'goblin' theory of poetic composition to its most grotesque point.

Surely it is not unreasonable to believe, even in respect to so intangible a thing as poetry, that they who have accomplished great ends know best the means to those ends. Corneille had a marvellous gift for poetry. He was spontaneous and prolific. But he was also a consummate literary artist. He had learned the great les-

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son that raw, untutored genius will not carry a man to the highest pinnacle of literary fame. There must be added patient, unremitting, finely directed toil.



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THE following list of books is, perhaps, sufficiently extended to meet the needs of the amateur of literature. The specialist will not require to be told how indispensable is the *Bibliographie Cornélienne*, by Émile Picot, Paris, 1876.

The materials relating to Corneille are divided into three groups: —

FIRST: Brief critical and biographical notices. After consulting the admirable manuals by Lanson, Lintilhac, Brunetière, and Faguet, the student may to his advan-

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8. Petit de Julleville (L.), *Histoire de la Langue et de la Littérature française*. Paris, Colin, 1897. Vol. IV., chapter 5. The chapter on Corneille, comprising about eighty pages, is by Jules Lemaître. One should also read the chapter on the 'théâtre au XVII siècle avant Corneille,' by E. Rigal, and the chapter on the 'théâtre au Temps de Corneille,' by Gustave Regnier. At the close of each chapter will be found a bibliography.

9. Marty-Laveaux (Ch.), *Notice biographique sur Pierre Corneille*, in Vol. I. of 'Œuvres de P. Corneille.' Paris, Hachette, 1862. Read, also, in Vol. III., pp. 3-76, the *Notice* on the *Cid*.

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10. Chéruel (A.), *Mémoires sur la vie publique et privée de Fouquet*. Paris, Charpentier, 1862. Vol. I., chapter 23.

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THIRD: Direct sources.

1. Corneille (Pierre), *Œuvres*, edited by Ch. Marty-Laveaux, in the series of 'Grands Écrivains de la France.' Paris, Hachette, 1862, in twelve volumes, with a supplementary 'album' of portraits, stage-settings, facsimiles, etc.

2. Gasté (Armand), *La Querelle du Cid, pièces et pamphlets publiés d'après les originaux, avec une introduction*. Paris, Welter, 1898.

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